

No. 776

NOV. 11, 1911

5 CENTS

NICK CARTER

WEEKLY

THE UNFINISHED LETTER



STREET & SMITH
PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

AFTER REMOVING THE STONE,
NICK THRUST HIS ARM INSIDE AND
DREW OUT ONE ARTICLE AFTER ANOTHER

NICK CARTER

THE UNFINISHED LETTER

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NICK CARTER

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Issued Weekly. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.
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Single Copies or Back Numbers, 5c. Each.

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No. 776.

NEW YORK, November 11, 1911.

Price Five Cents.

The Unfinished Letter;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S STRUGGLE WITH A COMPLEX MYSTERY.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A TAWNY-HEADED MYSTERY.

Mr. John Brayton completed the adjustment of his collar and tie, drew on his coat and vest, and stepped across the hall to the room opposite his own to awaken his young nephew, whom he had promised to take fishing with him that morning.

It was in his own house that he did this. The room he left across the hall to the other one was his own, and the one he entered had been occupied by himself when he was a child and until he became a man, for the house was the old Brayton homestead that had been in the family for several generations.

The nephew whom he started to awaken for the projected fishing trip was a new acquisition in the household, having been a member of the immediate family of John Brayton only a week, but he had already endeared himself to every one with whom he had come in contact.

The fishing trip referred to had been talked about ever since his arrival, and the date for it had been set within forty-eight hours after he came. This was the morning when the sixteen-year-old youngster was to be taught how to handle rod and reel and was to have his first experience of that sort, for his life hitherto, while surrounded by every luxury, had been utterly devoid of the things which pleased childhood and youth the most.

The hour was early, for there was a distance to drive before the actual business of fishing could begin. The sun was only just beginning to shine through the tops of the trees, and it was quite natural that the youth should be sleeping soundly when his uncle entered the room.

John Brayton approached the bed with quick, decided steps and reached out to raise the curtain to permit the sunlight to enter. Then he turned to the bed again, bent over it, and reached out his hand to pull

back the covering with a merry word and a heartless slap to arouse the youth, when he started back with a cry of amazement.

The bed was occupied, and John Brayton was perfectly excusable for having supposed, as he crossed the room to it, that it was his nephew who was so soundly sleeping beneath the cover. Imagine his surprise, therefore, when he saw, staring up at him, two round, wide-open, blue eyes filled with astonishment not unmixed with fear; and, wonder of all wonders, they looked up at him from a beautifully molded, if somewhat freckled, face of a girl whose head was a disheveled mass of touseled, tawny hair.

Where he had expected to find a round head of shortly cropped hair that was almost black in hue, and to see a pair of eyes to match it, he looked down into the face of a girl he had never seen before—an utter stranger to him.

And she seemed to be as startled as he was.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed.

"Where am I?" she cried out.

Both questions were pronounced at the same time, and each of the startled persons—the man who was rapidly approaching middle life, and the girl whose age was undeterminable as yet—were equally amazed by the strange encounter.

Brayton, who had just crossed the hall from his own room, was so astonished by what had happened that he glanced about him quickly to discover if there was not some mistake and to assure himself that he still was under his own roof. The girl started from her pillow to her elbow and swept a hasty glance around her, uttered a low cry of consternation, and sank back again, pulling the clothes hastily under her chin and holding them tightly.

The second impulse that stirred within Brayton was one of anger, for his thought was that he had been made the victim of a hoax. He turned back toward the girl and demanded angrily:

"How did you get here? Who brought you? Where is that precious nephew of mine? What has become of Jack? Did he do this thing? I knew that he was full of mischief, but I didn't suppose he would go so far as this. Who are you, girl?"

When he began to ask these rapid-fire questions there was nothing but fear depicted in the round blue eyes of the girl in the bed, but that expression changed first to an appearance of anger not unlike his own, and then to amusement.

"You have asked six questions all at once, sir," she replied, snuggling herself even more firmly into the

pillow. "You cannot expect me to answer them all at once. I haven't the least idea how I got here, and I am quite as puzzled to know who you are, as you appear to be surprised to see me." Then, with sudden recollection of the circumstance and in some anger, she demanded: "How dare you come into my room?"

"Your room?" exclaimed the man. "Why, it's Jack's room."

"Well, at least, I am in it, and you have no business here. Who brought me here, anyway? Did you?"

He stared at her dumbly.

There was no doubting her sincerity, and Brayton could not have denied that the circumstance seemed quite as much of a surprise to her as to him.

He turned to look about him with more care and thorough perception than he had used before.

With the curtain at the window raised, the sun shone warmly and brightly into the room, and fell directly upon a chair against the wall opposite. On this chair, none too neatly, but as if thrown down carelessly after the manner of girlhood, was this young person's clothing.

Brayton looked back again toward the bed, having discovered that his nephew's clothes were nowhere to be seen. He found the big, round blue eyes staring at him silently, and with growing wonder in their expression, for the intruder also had taken the opportunity to study the appearance of the room and its contents.

Nobody could have found fault with the appearance of it, for, while the furnishings were not artistic or luxurious, they were heavy and solid, refined and somewhat grand.

When the girl saw the expression of mingled doubt, anger, and amazement on Brayton's face, tears welled quickly into her eyes.

"Please," she exclaimed, half sobbingly, "who are you?"

He saw that she was in earnest.

"I am Mr. John Brayton, and this is my house," he replied. "This room has been, for a week past, occupied by my nephew, who is also John Brayton, but who is called Jack. Last night at half past nine o'clock, when I bade him good night, he was in this same bed where you are now. His hair, which is almost as black as yours is almost red, rested upon that same pillow where your head is lying now. We were to have gone fishing together this morning, and when I come in here to rouse him from my own room across the hall I find—you. Now, young lady, if you will be good enough to tell me who in Heaven's name you are,

and how you got here, and where Jack is, and why you are here instead of he, I'll be exceedingly obliged to you."

The long speech and the directness of it, pronounced as it was in a tone of entire sincerity, reassured the girl.

She smiled up at him through her tears and replied simply:

"I don't in the least know what you are talking about."

"You can answer my question, can't you?"

"I can answer one of them. I can tell you who I am."

"Well, who are you, then?"

"I am Miriam Archer."

"Who in the world is Miriam Archer?" he demanded.

"I am," she replied naïvely, and smiled again, as she lifted one tanned and freckled hand and wrist from beneath the covers in which she was buried and brushed aside the remaining tears.

"But where is Jack?" he questioned her, with another touch of anger.

"I haven't the least idea, because I don't know who Jack is," she responded.

"How did you get here? You must know that much."

"I don't."

"Who brought you here?"

"I don't know that, either."

"Well, what time did you come here? What time was it when you undressed and went to bed?"

She thought a moment before replying, then she said:

"I undressed myself and went to bed shortly before ten o'clock last night, but I did not do it in this room or in this house. I never saw you before, and I haven't the least idea where I am or how I got here. I went to bed in a small room, and now I wake up in this big one, which is like a strange world to me."

"Are you telling me the truth?" he demanded.

"I might as well ask you the same question," she retorted. "I think I have much more reason to doubt you than you have to disbelieve me. I went to sleep in a small single bed in a little room with dormer windows, and I woke up to find myself in this strange place. I would have screamed, when you entered, if I had not seen instantly that you were as startled as I was. Won't you please go out now, sir? After I dress I can talk to you, and, perhaps, we can clear up this mystery."

CHAPTER II.

OVER A TELEPHONE WIRE.

The foregoing scene has been described in order to account for the questions and replies which were passed over the telephone between John Brayton and Nick Carter, the famous detective, at eight o'clock that same morning, just after the detective had returned to his study from the breakfast table.

The bell rang while Nick was lighting his cigar, preparatory to seating himself to inspect the morning papers which Joseph, his butler, had arranged for him in the order he liked to read them, for it happened that the detective had nothing especial on hand that morning, and he was anticipating that rarity in his life which might be described as "a day to himself."

"This is Mr. John Brayton, of Brayton Braes," said a voice over the wire. "Am I speaking to Mr. Nicholas Carter, in person?"

"Yes," replied Nick. "How are you, Mr. Brayton?" He had met Brayton twice, two or more years before, in a case concerning a bank in which that gentleman was interested and of which he had been one of the directors at the time.

"Oh, I'm all right—so far as the physical being is concerned," was the reply. "But I am dreadfully upset by something that has happened here this morning, or during the night that has just passed. I say, Carter, are you too busy to come out here to 'The Braes' to see me this morning?"

"No—not if it is important that I should do so."

"Important! You may be sure that I would not ask you to come if it were not of the very greatest importance."

"What has happened, Mr. Brayton?"

"My nephew has disappeared."

"Your nephew?"

"Oh, I forgot that you did not know all about my nephew. Well, I won't stop to tell you about him over the telephone. He came to my house to live—more than a week ago. I'll give you that information when you get here."

"Very well; but, first, assure me that it is important that I should go to you. The truth is I was just congratulating myself upon having a day that was all my own, and I am somewhat reluctant to give it up unless there is a very good reason for doing so."

"There is a good reason."

"But what is it?"

"Jack has disappeared—right out of his bed—some time during the night—I don't in the least know just

when; and—say! I don't know whether you will believe it or not, but the fact is that another person appeared in his place."

"Another!"

"I don't blame you for expressing surprise."

"But what was it you said? I am not sure that I caught it."

"Oh, you caught it, all right—so did I, for that matter. I said that another person had appeared in his place, and I mean it. The worst of it is, the other person is a woman."

"A woman!"

"Oh, well, a girl. But it's the same thing. She's big enough to be a woman."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I. I don't yet. Neither did she, and she doesn't yet. That is why I want you to come out here—to help us to understand."

"The nephew has disappeared, eh?"

"Yes—just like you blow out a match."

"Where did he disappear from?"

"From his room—from his bed where I supposed he was sound asleep when I went after him to wake him up to go fishing this morning—at five-thirty."

"He wasn't there, eh?"

"I should say not. He was very much indeed not there."

"But the girl whom you say was substituted? Where did you find her?"

"In his bed."

"What?"

"Surest thing you know. She was there, and sound asleep, too, till I entered the room, which awakened her. Oh, I say, Carter, I can't explain it over the phone. Come out here as soon as you can—please! Won't you?"

"Wait a moment. What does the girl have to say about it."

"Just about as much as I have told you—concerning my end of it. She says that she doesn't know a thing about how she got there—and I believe her. You can't look into her wide-open blue eyes, and hear her talking to you, without believing every word she says. I feel as if I were living in the time of the Arabian nights and had given Aladdin's lamp a hard rub in my sleep."

"I see. All right, I'll come out to you."

"Thank you, Carter. I knew you would—or I thought so, at least, as soon as you knew about it. Talk about being face to face with a mystery, as they say in modern books, why, I have tumbled into one

over my head, and it's smothering me in the depths of it. How soon will you be out? It's a twenty-mile run with your car over good roads. You know the way?"

"Yes. I ought to be there in about an hour."

"Good. I'll hold my breath till you get here. I can't breathe without swearing and laughing and crying—all at once."

"Rather a mixture of emotions, that, Mr. Brayton."

"You bet your life it is. I'm angry whenever it occurs to me that it is all a hoax that somebody has been playing on me. I'm intensely amused when I think of the funny part of it, and of how stupefied I was—and the girl, too—when I found her; and I'm badly frightened when the serious side of it is uppermost in my mind and I remember that something serious may have happened to Jack. Talk about a double-barreled abduction, this is one with a vengeance. But I'll tell you all about it when you get here."

"Wait a moment. Doesn't the girl know anything about it?"

"Not a thing."

"She knows her own name, doesn't she?"

"Yes. It's Miriam Archer."

"Where does she live? Where is her home?"

"That's another funny part of the whole affair. She hasn't any."

"Hasn't any home?"

"Not what you would call one—no. She arrived in this country only the day before yesterday—from England. You'd know that she was English, all right, if you could hear her talk. But you'd better get that part of her story from her. You'll know how to question her about it better than I did."

"Possibly. How old is she? You say she is big enough to be a woman."

"Seventeen—a little less than a year older than Jack."

"Why, she is old enough to know something about herself—unless she is not bright."

"Bright? She is brighter than a new silver dollar."

"Then doesn't she know how she got to your house—how she was taken into it, and how she came to be sleeping in your nephew's bed?"

"She doesn't know a single thing about it—at least, she says she does not, and I am constrained to believe her."

"Was she undressed in the bed—prepared for bed, I mean?"

"Yes—nightdress on, and all that."

"Where was her clothing?"

"On a chair in the room. She told me, after she

was dressed and we were able to talk over the matter sensibly, that she found her clothing, article for article, just as she took them off and laid them upon a chair in quite another room, in quite another house, in quite another locality, too, for the scenery around here suggests nothing to her. She experiences about the same emotions that I do. She is as mad as a hornet one minute, and then feels like laughing and crying in the same breath. Oh, it's a mystery, all right, Mr. Carter."

"She does not remember undressing herself last night?"

"Sure she does. She remembers undressing herself and going to bed early last night; but she didn't do it here—nor anywhere near here, as far as I can make it out."

"But, doesn't she remember dressing herself again, and traveling, and then undressing herself once more, in another place?"

"I tell you no. She doesn't remember a thing about it."

"Does she think that she was drugged?"

"If she was, there isn't the slightest indication of it now. If a drug was used, it was something that has left no bad effects after it. She is perfectly well, and—well, she just slept quietly and peacefully through it all, whatever it was that happened."

"Then we will have to look up the people she was with, when she retired last night. She knows who they were, doesn't she?"

"No."

"Look here, Mr. Brayton, it begins to look as if you are the one who is attempting a hoax. What you say now is absurd."

"Not so absurd as it sounds in cold English, and without the explanation that goes with it, and I only wish to Heaven that it was all a hoax. But it isn't, unfortunately."

"You say that she arrived in the country only the day before yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Well, can't she tell you anything about that? Doesn't she know when and how she arrived, who met her at the steamer, where she went after that, and how she arrived at the place from which she was taken last night, in order to appear this morning at your house and in your nephew's bed?"

"The trouble is that that knowledge is so slight that it doesn't help us in the least."

"Well, tell me what you know about it. I will have something to think over while I am driving out to you."

"The story that she has told me, boiled down to a few words—you'll have to get the details after you arrive—is this: She was left an orphan by the death of her mother, three years ago, when she was fourteen. She doesn't remember her father at all, and I judge that he died while she was a baby, or just before she was born. She seems just a trifle reticent on that point, and it is the only part of her narrative at which she has faltered. She lived with strangers, in a village in England, after the death of her mother. A few weeks ago, a solicitor went to see her, from London, and told her about a distant relative of her father's who lived in this country. He said he had been instructed to send her over here if she was willing to come, and he gave her money, bought her passage, and saw her off on the steamer, and he cabled, or wrote, to the people over here that she had started. She was directed to go to a certain hotel and register, on her arrival, and her father's kinsman was to call for her within a few hours. The man did not appear, himself, but he sent a woman after her who took her to a railway station in a cab, and—— But I can't tell you all this over the phone. Wait till you get here, and let her tell it in her own way. That will be best. Bear one thing in mind, however: I'm a heap more interested just now to know what has become of Jack, than I am about the girl's history."

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE PREDICAMENT.

Nick Carter was at Brayton Braes, the home of John Brayton, twenty miles out of New York City. He was seated in the library with Brayton, and a servant had been dispatched to find Miss Archer and to conduct her to them for the consultation that was to follow.

While they were waiting, Brayton vouchsafed this much:

"Mrs. Brayton never had a child, and now we have given up the expectation of having one. I had a younger brother who was something of a scapegrace, and who went away from home at an early age. He married, and his wife died in giving birth to a boy, sixteen years ago. After that my brother disappeared and we heard nothing from him, or concerning the child. About four or five months ago I began a systematic search to find my brother Henry—and I did find him; but it was in his grave—the day after he had been put there. I took the boy and brought him here, deter-

mined to regard him as a son. That was a little more than a week ago. The boy is named for me. He is called Jack. I have become as fond of him in the little time he has been here, as if he were a child of my own. We have been regular chums. This morning I had promised to take him fishing over to Black Ben's Nose——"

"Where?"

"That is the name of a rock that some convulsion of nature has deposited on the summit of a small hill, not far from the eastern shore of Round Pond. It is about a mile across the pond either way. The rock stands near the shore of a small arm of the pond. If you look at the rock from the right direction, you see a perfectly shaped nose—hence, Black Ben's Nose. Old Ben Battles lives in a hut not far away from it, and, when I was a boy, we used to say that the nose on the rock was shaped exactly like Black Ben's, and the old fellow has been proud to have it called so."

The detective nodded. He was not particularly interested in that part of the tale.

"Black Ben's Nose, and all that part of the shore of the pond is on my property," Mr. Brayton continued. "I keep a couple of boats there. Ever since Jack came, he has wanted to go fishing on the lake—we call it that sometimes—so I promised to take him this morning. At half past five I went into his room to call him, and I found the girl."

"Did you not hear any unusual sounds during the night?" asked Nick.

"None."

"How are the two rooms located, as related to each other?"

"They are directly across the hall from each other."

"There were other persons in the house at the time; did nobody hear anything?"

"Not a thing. I have made inquiries."

"Mrs. Brayton——"

"She is away from home at present. She'll return to-day. Jack and I were virtually alone in that part of the house last night."

"Have you examined the doors and windows, and the grounds near the windows, outside the house?"

"I have not. I have warned everybody—the servants, I mean, for now there is nobody here but the servants, and the girl, and me. I told them all to keep off the grass, so to speak, till you got here. If there were marks, they are there yet. As for the doors, they were locked, as usual, but I guess the windows of the house, all the way around it, were pretty generally wide open. It's summer, you know."

"Yes. Now, as to the girl——"

"Here she is, Mr. Carter. Let her speak for herself. Come right inside, Miss Archer."

She came forward from the doorway. Her face was flushed, as if she had been hurrying to respond to the summons that had been sent to her. It would not do to say that she was beautiful, or even pretty, for neither word would express the truth. She was simply charming, and her wealth of tawny hair and baby-blue eyes, her pert little nose, red lips and cheeks, white teeth and well-molded chin fitted perfectly with the rather slender figure which had not yet reached its full development.

She paused halfway across the floor to acknowledge the introduction that followed, and Nick, studying her, decided at once that there was no guile there. Already, even before he had heard her part of the story from her own lips, he was constrained, as Brayton had been, to believe it.

"This is Mr. Carter, a long-time acquaintance of mine from New York, who is used to battling with mysteries, and who can help us in our difficulties. And, Carter, this is Miss Miriam Archer," said Brayton, by way of introduction.

Nick took the girl's hand and held it for a moment while he looked into her clear eyes. He saw truth there, and innocence, too; but it was innocence with intelligence.

"You are in a very strange predicament, Miss Archer," he said to her.

Moisture gathered in her eyes, but she smiled through it bravely, thrusting back the willing tears in her determination to be brave.

"Please," she said, and she hesitated long enough to glance over at Brayton, and then back to Nick Carter, "please call me by my given name. It will make me feel so much more at ease. I know that I shall be able to reply to your questions much better, if you will do so; and I have never been Miss Archer to anybody in all my life."

"Certainly, Miriam, we will do that," Nick replied quickly. "Tell me what your impressions are about this matter."

"I am utterly bewildered, that is all."

"But isn't there an impression of some sort upon your mind, regarding the cause of your trouble?"

"I seem to be lost—utterly lost—that is all," she replied.

"Have you no recollection at all of the things that must have happened to you last night?"

"No, sir; not even so much as a dream."

"You went to bed—where?"

"In a small room, with one dormer window in it. I liked it because it reminded me of my own room at home, before my mother died. Just the dormer window did that—nothing else."

"What kind of a house was it?"

"Just a small house in the country—but I don't, in the least, know where it was, nor how far away from here it may be."

"Was it close to the road, or did it stand back, away from the highway?"

"Oh, that? There was a white fence made of pickets, in front of it, with a gate in the center of the fence. The gate stood wide open as we passed through. There was a rope that hung from the gate to the fence, and this rope had a tin bucket tied to it, and there were stones in the bucket, but evidently not enough of them to keep the gate closed. There were flowers blooming along each side of the path to the porch of the house—pansies, and poppies, and golden glow, and others."

"You used the expression 'as we passed through.' Who was with you?"

"Mrs. Field—the woman who came to the hotel after me."

"What hotel was it?"

"The Criterion."

"Perhaps I will ask you more about that woman later on. Just now, tell me the name of the people who lived in the small house with the white fence in front of it."

"Field."

"Oh, then the house you speak of was the home of the woman who met you in the city, to conduct you to your relative?"

"No. I think they were relatives of hers—cousins, I believe. I am not quite sure."

"Did they—the people who lived there—act as though they were expecting you? Was your arrival there anticipated?"

"No, I don't think so. They seemed quite surprised, and none too pleased at the prospect of our remaining overnight."

"How many persons did you see in that house?"

"Two elderly persons—a man and a woman. They seemed very nice."

"Did the house stand alone? Was it located in a village, or out in the country?"

"Oh, it was in the country. We had passed through the main street of a village some distance back—a mile or more, I should say."

"Why did you stop there?"

"Because of the storm that was threatening. It came on presently—almost as soon as we were well inside the house."

"How did you get that far? In what sort of a conveyance?"

"We went in what Mrs. Field called a hack, from the station. I should have said that it was a two-seated surrey."

"And how far away was the station? How long a time were you driving?"

"Oh, it must have been nearly an hour; perhaps it was longer than that. I was much interested in the scenery about me, and did not notice the time."

"What kind of scenery was it that you noticed?"

"Very beautiful, but rather rough. There were hills, and rocks, and woods, but no large trees, such as we have in the forests at home. But such rocks and stones, and such queer fences! Only now and then was a stone wall, and I saw no hedges at all."

"Don't you know the name of the railway station where you left the train, and entered the surrey?"

"No. I don't think I heard it at all."

"Not when Mrs. Field was purchasing the tickets?"

"She already had them when we arrived at the station in New York."

"You know what station that was, of course."

"No—only that it was a very large building, and that there were throngs of people hurrying in all directions, when we arrived there. But it was located on a wide avenue, and was not very far from the hotel where we started."

"Probably the Pennsylvania," said Brayton, interrupting for the first time. "I assumed that much."

"Probably," replied the detective.

"And, you see, that makes it all the worse, for from the Pennsylvania she could have gone out upon Long Island, or into Jersey."

"We won't discuss that just now," said the detective. "Let us get back to the station where you left the train in the company of Mrs. Field. Didn't you see the name of it anywhere about you, when you got off?"

"I don't think so."

"Was it much of a station—a large one, I mean?"

"No; it was very insignificant, and there didn't seem to be any village at all close to it. There were several surreys waiting for hire."

"Were you standing near to Mrs. Field when she engaged the surrey? Didn't you hear her tell the driver where she wished to be taken, or ask the amount of the fare?"

"No. She put down on the platform one of my bags that she was carrying, and told me to wait. In a few moments she returned, and we went to the carriage together, and were driven away. I suppose I am very stupid, Mr. Carter."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DOUBLE ABDUCTION.

Brayton interrupted.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Carter, but, with all due respect to this young lady, in whom I am deeply interested, I wish to say that, for the moment, I am much more concerned about what has become of my nephew than I am in regard to the way station to which this young woman was taken by the woman who called herself Mrs. Field. I have no doubt that all of that will develop in time, but just now I want most to know what has become of Jack."

"Quite right, Mr. Brayton," returned Nick, smiling; "and that is precisely what we are getting at."

"I don't just see it."

"The disappearance of your nephew and the substitution of Miriam in his place have to do with the same act, and one is closely related to the other. It would seem that there is much more to this affair than appears on the surface. The only available clew that we have at present exists in the presence here of Miriam. I will ask you if you or your wife have any relatives by the name of Field or Archer?"

"I have no relatives by either of those names, and I am quite sure that my wife has not."

"Is there anything in your recollection which could connect either name with your affairs or those of your wife?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You say that your nephew was with you here only a little more than a week?"

"Yes."

"And that when you went after him to bring him here, his father, your youngest brother, had only just been buried?"

"Yes, that is the circumstance."

"I understood you to say that you have known little or nothing of that brother since he left home rather more than sixteen years ago."

"Nothing at all."

"So that you have no reason for associating this abduction of your nephew with any possible grudge that others might have held against your brother?"

"No, I had not thought of that at all."

"Have any strangers appeared about the place, or has any been seen in conversation with the boy since he has been here?"

"Not that I know of."

"How has he occupied himself?"

"Why, as boys do who are visiting at a place for the first time. He had never been accustomed to the luxury or to just the sort of environment that he found here. Everything seemed to interest him."

"What one particular thing has he done more than another since he has been here?"

"That is hard to tell."

"Did he have any young associates?"

"No; and I think he felt lonely on that account."

"What did he do with himself?"

"Oh, he wandered about the place, inspecting everything with a great deal of interest. He has visited Black Ben two or three times, I believe."

"Who and what is this Black Ben?"

"He is a character, Carter, whom it would take a whole book to describe. He draws a pension from the government, and this is more than sufficient for his needs. He lives in the hut I have mentioned. He fishes occasionally in Round Pond, and he shoots partridges or rabbits occasionally. He is virtually a squatter on my land, but he has been here since I was a child, and we looked upon him as being as essentially a part of the estate as one of the trees that grow upon it."

"Why is he called Black Ben?"

"I don't know precisely. I should say because his skin is very dark and his hair and beard, before it began to turn, was jet black. Personally, I have always thought that he was half Indian; possibly he has negro blood in his veins."

"What is he as to character?"

"Rather morose and sullen, but I have never known him to do anything really objectionable. He would never work, and I suppose the fear that I felt in regard to him when I was a boy left its impression upon me when I grew to be a man. I have always tolerated him and he has always been respectful on those rare intervals when I have encountered him. One of the servants told me that Jack had found him out in his cabin over near the pond, and had been there several times to see him. I asked Jack about it, and he said he had met him, that he had been to the cabin, and that Black Ben had told him stories about the early history of the lake. I could see no harm in it, and so offered no objection. That is all I know about it."

The detective turned again to the young woman, who seemed eager to speak, and he asked her:

"What is it you would like to say, Miriam?"

"I want to ask a very natural question," she said tremulously.

"Well, what is it?"

"What is to become of me? Where am I to go? What am I to do?"

"As I understand it, you are to remain here until this mystery concerning you is solved," replied the detective, smiling.

"But, sir, I have not so much as a farthing in money, and I am without clothing, save what I am wearing now. Really, I am utterly destitute and homeless."

"You may have a home here as long as you care to remain in it?" said Brayton quickly. "I want you to know that I thoroughly sympathize with you in the predicament in which you find yourself, and there can be no question about your remaining here and making this your home until you find another that you can go to."

"That is very kind of you, indeed, sir, but——"

"And as for clothing, I will be glad to supply you with whatever you need. We will ask Mrs. Knott, the housekeeper, to fit you out."

"What baggage did you have with you, Miriam, when you arrived in this country?" the detective asked.

"I had a trunk and two bags—one large one, and one small one."

"What became of those articles?"

"I took the bags with me to the hotel where Mrs. Field met me, and I had them with me at the house where I retired to sleep last night. Both bags were in the room with me."

"I suppose that neither of them was brought here with you?"

"No," said Brayton, interrupting, "there was nothing brought here with her, save what you see her in now."

"Not even your hat or a wrap of any kind?" the detective asked, turning again toward her.

"No, sir."

"What became of your trunk?"

"I directed that the trunk be sent to me at the hotel. When Mrs. Field called there after me, I gave her the check for it, and she said that she would see that it was sent to our destination. I have not seen it since it left England, in the hold of the steamship on which I was a passenger."

The detective was silent for a moment, and then, half turning in his chair, so that he faced Brayton, he said:

"This seems to have been an abduction deliberately planned, although it does not appear anywhere what the motive could have been. Here are two cases which apparently bear not the slightest relation to each other, but which are brought together in a manner which should assure us that they are somehow related. Your nephew, who would be your heir at law, and whom you intended should become so by your will, has been stolen away out of your house in the middle of the night for a reason which does not appear, and for which we can find no explanation. A young woman not related to your family at all arrives in this country from England, sent over here by a solicitor, and is met at a hotel in New York by a woman she never heard of, is taken to a railway station, and thence to some point in the country, and is then stolen away in her sleep, and brought to this house, where she is substituted for your nephew. Now, Mr. Brayton, as I view the matter, it cannot be possible that the two circumstances are associated with each other, save through some sort of coincidence. They appear to be related only in the abstract.

"This young woman left England to come here at about the same time that your nephew arrived here at this house as its prospective heir. Some considerable time has elapsed since that solicitor first went to Miriam to talk with her about coming to this country, and, if there was any sort of plot against her, we are compelled to assume that it took form before you personally had any idea of making the junior John Brayton your heir.

"Now, you were a childless millionaire, practically without relatives, and certainly without any relative near enough to induce you to leave him all your wealth in your will. If we should assume, for the sake of argument, that some person had conceived the idea of introducing this young woman into your family with the idea that you would become fond of her, and ultimately adopt her, perhaps——"

"And make her my heir by leaving all my property to her ultimately, eh? That's rather far fetched, isn't it, Carter?"

"It is a remote possibility, Mr. Brayton; but to proceed with the idea: If such had been the case, we find that by the time Miriam, who had been sent for from England, arrived here, another had been installed into the place for which the plotters intended her."

"But that is nonsense," said Brayton.

"Very likely, but it is a theory, and it gives us something to work upon."

"But it assumes that there was no reason for the abduction of Jack, does it not?"

"No reason other than to get him out of the way—yes."

Brayton left his chair, and crossed over to the window, where he stood looking out for a moment, then he turned, and, with his hands thrust deeply into his trousers pockets, he said:

"I can't accept any such theory as the one you advance, Carter, as being within the limits of probability. One thing is certain, and that is that, as the case stands now, Miriam Archer is in no danger. She has found a home where she is quite welcome, and where she is tenderly cared for. She has lost nothing save a trunk and two bags, and these probably can be recovered. On the other hand, my nephew, Jack, has mysteriously disappeared from his room in this house, and may be in imminent danger right now. He may have been murdered already, for all I know. I want, therefore, to insist that you begin the search for him at once."

"Very good," said Nick, rising. "If you will let me use your telephone for a moment, I will do so."

A few moments later he had called up his own house, and had Patsy on the wire. He gave Patsy a brief account of all that had happened to Miriam Archer since her arrival in New York, relating the time when she arrived at the Criterion Hotel, and her departure from it in company with Mrs. Field in a taxicab. In addition to that, he said:

"I want you to go to that hotel, Patsy, and trace forward and backward everything that relates at all to this girl. I want you to find out where that taxicab took her and her companion, and where they went after they left the taxi. Stick to the trail until it brings you here to this house. The clerks at the hotel, the porters, the carriage clerk, the driver of the taxicab, somebody at the railway station, which was probably the Pennsylvania, and the conductor or a trainman on the cars that they took out of the station should, by careful questioning, be made to remember something about her. She is a young woman so essentially English, and so charming, that she should have attracted attention. Get your information out to me as quickly as you can, and call in all the help you may require to assist you."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Brayton, who was standing near him.

"Come, now," he said, "we will try to see if there

is any trace left of the route by which your nephew was taken away from this house."

CHAPTER V.

BLACK BEN'S NOSE.

The detective was very quickly satisfied that it could not have been at all difficult for the persons who had been instrumental in this affair to enter and leave the house, even with their burdens, in coming and going, without alarming John Brayton or any of his servants.

The servants occupied a wing of the house which was devoted entirely to their uses, and which was entirely separate from the main dwelling. The buildings were far removed from any of their neighbors, and the neighborhood was a quiet one, which hitherto had been deemed entirely secure from the visitation and depredations of tramps, yeggman, and crooks generally.

It had been the habit to lock the doors at night; but, for the most part, the windows were rarely fastened, and sometimes, indeed, were left entirely open. This was particularly true of the windows of the second story.

The room in which Jack had gone to sleep was a very large one, occupying the entire corner of the southwest front of the building, and the room in which his uncle had retired to rest was almost its counterpart at the northwest corner. A wide hall extended entirely through the house from front to rear between these two rooms. On the sod beneath the south window of the nephew's room were plainly revealed the marks of the ladder which had been placed against the roof of the piazza to enable the abductions to enter. The grass indicated that the feet of several different persons had trodden upon it during the preceding night. But these marks were so indistinct because of the dry weather that had prevailed for some time past, that it was impossible to get an outline of any of the footprints.

Here and there a heel print had been indented deeply enough in the sod to show its character, but that was all.

A few feet back from the marks made by the ladder and the feet of the visitors was the concreted roadway which ran entirely around the house, and here, of course, there was no trace left.

But from the heel marks and footprints, Nick Carter was not long in determining that there had been at least one woman and probably three men at the foot of that ladder during the night.

That the persons concerned in the affair had gone deliberately about their work was plainly apparent, for the screen in the window over the roof of the piazza had been removed, and as carefully replaced after the intruders had left the room.

Inside the room there was just one blade of grass and one bit of soil from the ground below.

The concreted roadway which passed around the house led to the entrance to the grounds where there was a small lodge, which was closed and in disuse. Beyond the gate at the lodge, under a maple with spreading branches beside the road, there were wheel tracks to show that a vehicle of some sort had been drawn up there. Indentations in the ground indicated that two horses attached to this vehicle had stood there for a considerable time, stamping, as horses will, when held in restraint.

These facts as described include all that the detective was able to find concerning the enforced departure of young Jack Brayton from the home of his uncle.

With the aid of Mrs. Knott, the housekeeper, it was discovered that nothing that belonged to the youth had been taken away with him save the clothing he had worn the preceding day.

There seemed nowhere to be a motive for the outrageous procedure; nothing could be found to indicate a logical reason for the abduction, and still less could the imagination supply an explanation for the substitution for the girl in his place.

During the time that the detective was making the investigations which have here been told in substance, John Brayton was close at his heels, constantly asking questions, and, in effect, hampering the detective, and annoying him considerably. It was without regret, therefore, that the detective saw him called away finally, in response to a telephone message which obliged him to leave the house for an hour or two.

The detective went out to the piazza when Brayton left the house, and there Miriam joined him.

They stood side by side silently for several moments. The detective could see that there were tears in the girl's eyes, and knew that she was very deeply affected by the strange circumstances that surrounded her.

"You feel dreadfully about this, do you not, Miriam?" he asked her kindly.

"I do, sir. It is so incomprehensible."

"Does no explanation for it occur to you—not even a remote one?"

"No, sir—none at all."

"Do you remember ever to have heard the name of Brayton before?"

"No, sir."

"Tell me about your parents."

"I do not remember my father at all," she replied to him in a low tone. "It was not long ago that my mother died, however."

"Did she ever mention to you that she had relatives in this country?"

"Yes; but she never mentioned them by name."

"Were they her relatives or your father's?"

"I do not know."

"What is your impression about that?"

"If I had any impression at all, Mr. Carter, it was that they both had connections in this country, although I always have understood that I was English."

"But the name of Brayton suggests nothing to you, you say?"

"No, sir. I am positive that I never heard it until this morning."

"When the solicitor came to you to induce you to leave England and come here, what argument did he use to prevail upon you to accept his proposition?"

"He told me that he had been commissioned by a client in America to find me out. He said that already he had investigated my birth and parentage, so he was satisfied as to my identity. He told me that the gentleman who was his client was a very wealthy man, who lived in New York, but whether he meant the city or State of New York, I do not know. He said that he had been instructed by that person to send me to America."

"One moment. Did he say it was a relative of your father or of your mother?"

"Of my father."

"Well?"

"He was to send me over here if I were willing to come. My situation at the time was such that I was quite willing. I had been living with strangers in the little village of Hampton since the death of my mother, who died three years ago. I had been and was a dependent, and I was only too glad of the opportunity to escape from such a position."

"But you must have heard the name of this relative who sent for you?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled at him, "it was the same as my own."

"Archer?" asked Nick.

"Yes, Mr. Herbert Archer."

"Had you any idea what position you were to assume when you arrived here?"

"Merely that I was to become a member of his family, because of my blood relationship."

"And this name of Field—this name of the woman who came after you at the hotel—meant nothing to you?"

"No, sir."

"What did you understand concerning Mrs. Field's relation to Mr. Herbert Archer, or how did she explain it?"

"She did not explain it at all. I assumed—perhaps without adequate reason—that she was a governess or a companion, or something of the sort in the household."

"What did you talk about in your conversation with Mrs. Field, during the trip on the car with her, and while you were in your surrey on your way to the house from which you were abducted?"

"She told me something about the home to which I was going, but very little about the people in it. I asked her if there were in the house any young women of my age, and she said there were. She offered no further information, however. In fact, now that I think it over, I am inclined to the belief that she purposely avoided all direct reference to them."

"What did she say about Herbert Archer or the members of his household?"

The girl smiled wanly and replied:

"When I try to recall it, I find that she said next to nothing at all. She succeeded in giving me the impression that he was a kindly old gentleman, past middle age, who was lonely, notwithstanding the fact that he had other young people about him, but that he was ready to give his affection to one like myself who might be affectionate and considerate of him. That is about all."

The detective shook his head, feeling that he was more bewildered by the circumstances of this case, than any with which he had had to do.

"The more I question you," he said, "the farther away we seem to be from anything that will help us. I am going to take a short walk through the woods now. Would you like to go with me?"

"I should like to very much, indeed," she replied.

"You heard Mr. Brayton and me make some mention of Black Ben and Black Ben's Nose, did you not?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Yes, sir."

"I am going there. I want to find his cabin. I have no reason for supposing that he has had anything to do with this affair, but, ever since I first heard the

mention of his name, it has seemed to me that he might have."

A few questions asked of one of the servants supplied the necessary directions, and they took the path through the woods to Black Ben's cabin, located, as has been said, on the narrow arm of Round Pond.

While they were yet some distance away from the cabin, they could see the huge boulder at the top of the hill which Mr. Brayton had described, and which went by the name of Black Ben's Nose. Their position was such that the huge outlines of the forehead and nose could be seen plainly against the sky.

Presently they turned aside from the road to the woods into a narrow but well-beaten path which led down to the cabin of Black Ben Battles, where Black Ben himself usually was found seated upon a bench at the door, engaged in whittling out some one of the many curious articles he manufactured with a jack-knife.

Just now, as they approached the cabin, the man was nowhere to be seen. As they moved along the path which led between two groves of alders, an intuitive foreboding of what he might find there, led the detective to come to a halt and to say to his companion:

"Wait here a moment, Miriam, until I call to you. I think I had better go forward to the cabin alone."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEAD MAN ON THE FLOOR.

It was well that Nick Carter left Miriam Archer behind him when he went forward to that cabin door, which was half ajar, but which was obstructed by something which held it when Nick sought to push it farther open.

Peering inside, the detective could see the legs and feet of a man stretched upon the earthen floor, the upper part of the body being hidden from view behind the door.

The detective squeezed himself inside the cabin through the opening, managing to do so without disturbing the body of the man that was lying there.

"It was Black Ben Battles, without a doubt. The description already supplied to the detective had been sufficient to assure him of that much.

He saw a tall, powerfully built and muscular man, with close-cropped, iron-gray hair, that had doubtless once been jet black, with a strong, clean-cut face, that he had evidently shaved that morning—the body of a man who had been neat about his personal appearance,

and who was probably much better-looking and more impressive as to features in death than he had been in life.

On the earthen floor was a shoemaker's hammer and upon the man's head was a wound evidently made by that instrument when he was struck down.

It was almost certain that death had been instantaneous, and it was equally obvious that he had been struck without warning, and by one who, having stolen upon him stealthily, had delivered the blow before he had suspected the presence of his assailant.

The victim had fallen out of a chair that had been fashioned out of a barrel by sawing one-half of one end of it away and affixing a seat to it. This chair was beside a table which had been made by driving stakes into the earthen floor and nailing crosspieces and boards fast to them.

Upon the table was an ordinary tin can that once had been used for preserving corn. This can was half filled with red paint, dissolved to a thinness almost like water. A hickory stick, sharpened to a point like a pencil, one end of it smeared with the paint, was beside the can, and there was a piece of yellow wrapping paper, much soiled, and with the lower right-hand corner torn away, also upon the table between the paint pot and the chair. About one-third of the original square of paper was missing from the right-hand corner.

A glance told the detective that the paper contained some sort of a message, which had been printed upon it with the red ink and by the use of the hickory stick, and he could see that there was also a blotch of red upon it as if made by the print of a finger or a thumb of some person in handling it—probably by the man who had written the message was Nick Carter's first thought.

Then he turned his attention from it to the body upon the floor.

A quick examination developed the fact that the man was not only dead, but that several hours had elapsed since he was struck down.

The presence of the hammer, which had been used, was easily explained when over in one corner of the hut the detective discovered a rudely made cobbler's seat, containing brad, awl, and pegs, bits of leather, and several pairs of old boots and shoes, all indicating that the occupant of the cabin had not been reluctant to manufacture his own footwear out of whatsoever stray pieces of boots and shoes he could find during his wanderings.

It was evident that the assailant, whoever he might

have been, had entered the cabin by stealth while Black Ben was seated at the table with his back toward the door, and, having secured the hammer from the cobbler's bench, had struck the blow with it, and then had hurried off, just as it was evident that the extraordinary vitality of Black Ben had enabled him to struggle to his feet and half turn about before he fell against the door, partly closing it.

And the murderer, whoever he might have been, had not thought it necessary to examine into what Black Ben had been writing.

The message remained, whatever it might prove to be, and Nick Carter bent over the table, the better to examine it in the dim light which penetrated to the interior of the cabin.

"An unfinished letter," he muttered.

It was, indeed, an unfinished letter, crudely made, and fashioned upon a scrap of stray wrapping paper, which Black Ben doubtless had found in some ditch beside a road.

The paint in the can had taken the place of ink, and the pointed hickory stick had been the instrument of writing.

The message had been printed, capital and small letters being used indiscriminately, and without regard to their proper relation one to another.

Nick Carter bent farther over to read the letter, but paused as he did so, his attention being attracted to the red blotch which he now saw had been made by the print of a thumb which had rested there.

But he saw more than that, for he instantly detected a difference in the coloring of that red blotch and the painted letters upon the paper. Before he tried to read the printed words, he took his magnifying glass from his pocket, and, holding it over the red blotch, examined it more closely, satisfied already that although the printed letters had been made with red paint, the print of the thumb was not.

"Blood, without a doubt," he said aloud.

Then he returned the magnifying glass to his pocket, and gave his attention to the unfinished letter itself.

Here is what he read:

"DEEAR SUR: I seen two men jes now carryin away that new feller you brung to your house last weak an I reckon thay meen to do for the feller too an that aint no idol jest I was in it fustoff but they dubbledcrossed me an Ime sendin this tu git square not carin nothin bout the yung feller or you but wishing to give them back es good as thay give me When thay find this out thay will put the kibosh onto me for keeps but thats gotta happen anyhow so wots the difrense. Ime writin this on ole peece uh paper I found so ples skuse If you

wanta find the yung feller you go at nite after 12 an afore 3 cose they aint there then This aint blood lme writin with its red paint so dont be skared You go down to Black Bens Nose an turn to the——"

Here, then, was one slight clew concerning what had happened to the youthful nephew of John Brayton.

Whatever plot had been afoot in the beginning, Black Ben Battles had been, by his own confession, in sympathy with it at one time, but it was evident from this unfinished letter that he had determined to betray his associates, and had been in the very act of doing so when he was struck down by this shoemaker's hammer in the hand, doubtless, of one of his former cronies.

The very first sentence of the letter which was evidently addressed to Brayton was full of significance, and, as the detective studied it over, he could read much between the lines which the writer had not included or meant to include in his message.

"I saw two men just now carrying away that new feller you brought to your house last week, and I reckon they mean to do for the feller, too, and that's no idle jest," said the detective aloud, putting the first sentence of that letter into somewhat better English than Black Ben had done.

"That would indicate that young Jack was abducted from the house by two men who were known to Black Ben Battle, and with whom he had intended to co-operate in the abduction; but it also indicates that they carried out the abduction before the appointed time, and sought to do so without Black Ben's knowledge, thereby committing the act, or a part of it, which he has called 'double crossing' him.

"But nothing is said here about a woman, and there was certainly one present at that abduction, for no man ever wore the boot that would leave that particular heel imprint upon the sod; and so it would appear that, in the beginning, when this conspiracy was first thought of, there were others connected with it besides Black Ben and the two men to whom he referred.

"But even that is not the significant part of the letter to me," he continued in thought, after a moment's pause. "'And I reckon they meant to do for the feller, too, and that ain't no idle jest.'

"That would indicate that Black Ben knew what he was talking about—or, rather, what he was trying to write about. He says nothing here about any demand for ransom. He does not suggest that the boy was abducted for the sake of extorting money from John Brayton. He says, plainly enough, that they mean to do for the young fellow, which, in his parlance, means to murder him."

The detective was startled at that instant by a sound at the half-opened doorway, and he started to his feet to discover the frightened face of Miriam peering in at him. Her blue eyes had discovered the horror of the place instantly, and her face had turned deathly white. But she controlled herself admirably, and, in obedience to a quick gesture from the detective, she retreated into the open air. Nick followed her.

"You should not have gone in there, Miriam," he said to her. "It was because I feared something of the sort that I asked you to wait."

"I was frightened when you did not come back, and I heard nothing at all."

"I know," he said. "Now, will you wait here until I get through in there?"

"Yes," she replied, and shuddered.

"Would you prefer to return to the house?" he asked her.

"No—oh, no. I would rather stay here."

"You were frightened by what you saw?"

"It was dreadful," she assented.

"But you are more shocked than frightened, aren't you?"

"I'm not frightened," she answered. "At least I don't think so. I was startled for a moment when you did not reappear, and when I did not hear a sound from inside the cabin." Then she raised her eyes and looked quite calmly into his while she added: "Can I be of any help to you in there?" and she pointed with her finger toward the open door.

"Would you prefer to go inside with me?" he asked.

"Yes, if I may."

"But, child, there is a dead man in there."

"I am not afraid of dead men, Mr. Carter; but, since what happened to me last night, I am dreadfully afraid of the living ones. Please don't leave me alone in this terrible place."

"Terrible?" he repeated after her, and looked more closely at her. "Except for what has happened in there, it is very peaceful and quiet here. Why does it seem terrible to you?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Only that it is so like a scene that I must have dreamed about—a cabin in the woods, the arm of a lake extending toward it, the silence, and the old cabin with a dead man inside of it."

He had been turning away toward the cabin door, but he paused abruptly.

"You have had such a dream as that?" he asked her.

"A dream—or a memory," she replied.

"But which?"

"I don't know."

"Is it of the long ago or of recent date?"

"Oh, long ago—very long ago. It is like a dream or a memory of childhood. I don't know which."

"Come," he said to her, "we will not discuss it now."

And he led the way into the cabin.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TURN TO THE RIGHT.

It has been said that the light within the cabin was dim, and, therefore, it was a moment after Miriam, following the detective, entered it, before she could see distinctly the conditions by which she was surrounded.

Nick stood watching her, interested to learn just how she would act under such trying circumstances, although he had had no motive in taking her inside the hut, other than to comply with her request that she be not left alone.

She halted just within the door, and slowly lowered her gaze until it rested upon the table and its contents. She then glanced at the dead man on the floor.

From the rough cowhide boots, patched in many places, to the trousers, tucked inside of their tops, and fastened at the hips with a leather strap for a belt, to his hairy chest, for the bosom of his shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and thence to his strong, lean face—for the wound he had received was at the back of his head and was not visible from where she stood—the young woman's gaze traveled quickly. But it halted the instant it rested upon the features of the dead man, and Nick saw a look of amazement, quickly succeeded by one of wondering doubt, come to her eyes.

She took a quick step toward the body of the man and bent a little forward, peering almost eagerly into that upturned face, which was strong and handsome in its way.

Nick detected an expression of recognition in Miriam's eyes. This was quickly succeeded by one of doubt and uncertainty.

"Who is the man?" she asked, in a low tone, and it was evident that she was controlling herself with an effort.

"Black Ben, the man you have heard spoken of."

"But who was he, really?"

"Black Ben. That is all I know about him."

"He has been murdered?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

Nick pointed to the letter on the table.

"Judging from the contents of that letter, which he

did not have time to finish, he was killed by one of the men who was instrumental in the abduction of young Jack Brayton, and who, doubtless, knew something about your own unexplained presence here."

She was silent, as she turned again to study the face of the dead man for an instant. Then again she raised her eyes to Nick Carter.

"I thought you recognized him when you first looked upon him," said Nick.

"I thought so, too," she replied.

"Did you, indeed, recognize him as some one you had seen before?"

"No."

"What made you think you did?"

"A resemblance."

"To whom?"

"To a man I once talked with on the highway near Hampton—the village where I lived in England."

"When was that?"

"More than two years ago."

"Since the death of your mother, then?"

"Yes—something less than a year afterward."

"I am told that this man had never been away from this place. Do you think it could have been he?"

"No; this is not the man who spoke to me over there."

"But, at first glance, you thought it was?"

"Yes."

"Tell me just why you thought so."

"I have a strong memory for faces, Mr. Carter. I rarely forget a face that I have once seen, and I can almost always identify it, too. The man to whom I have referred accosted me on the highway when I was returning from my daily walk into the country. He stared at me in a peculiar manner that interested rather than alarmed me. I don't want you to think he was offensive, for I was sure, even then, that he did not intend to be so. He asked me who I was, and I told him my name. He raised his hat and passed on. Until now I had utterly forgotten the incident."

"You mean until this face brought it to your mind?"

"Yes."

"More than likely it is only a chance resemblance," the detective said, and he shrugged his shoulders as he turned away to again produce his magnifying glass and study the thumb print on the unfinished letter.

After a moment he folded the letter and put it in his pocket; then, after another hasty survey of the room and its contents, he motioned for Miriam to precede him, and they stepped out of the cabin. Nick

paused long enough to close the door and to fasten it securely.

"If you are not afraid to return to the house alone, Miriam, I think I will send you there," he said to her. "I want to do some searching in the immediate vicinity of this cabin and the pond, and also up near that rock which is called Black Ben's Nose."

"Please let me go with you," she protested. "I will not trouble you. I will keep in the background, and I promise not to speak unless I am spoken to. You see, everything is so strange to me here, and I—I am so utterly alone."

"Very well. You may stay," the detective replied.

After that he concentrated his mind upon what he had to do, and paid no further attention to Miriam, being conscious only that she remained near to him, but always in the background.

His first care was to examine more carefully the path that approached the cabin through the alders, and he had traversed nearly the length of this without discovering anything of interest, when suddenly he bent down and gave his attention to the imprint of a heel that he had found where the ground was softer than the area that surrounded it.

"Wait here a moment," he said sharply to his companion; then, stepping around the imprint he had discovered, he hastened farther down the path to where he had noticed some blue clay when he had first approached the cabin.

A half dozen strides took him to that arm of the lake which has already been referred to. Here he scooped up a double handful of water and carried it back with him to the deposit of blue clay.

Spilling the water upon this, he moistened it all and worked it with his fingers until he was enabled to secure a handful of it, which he rendered soft by working it between his hands. With the moistened clay he hastened back to where he had left Miriam, and very quickly fitted it into the heel mark that he had found there, thus securing a perfect copy of the size and shape of the heel of a woman's shoe—one which he believed to be identical with that other one he had discovered previously beside the spot where the ladder had been raised against the piazza of John Brayton's house.

After that, he followed the arm of the lake down to where the boathouse was located; this he found to be securely locked.

But there was a spot on the sand of the shore, near to it, where the prow of a boat had been drawn up and shoved off again, although there was no means of his determining just when that had been done; but, again,

beside it, in the moist sand, was the unmistakable imprint of that same heel.

"We need go no farther here," he said to Miriam, as he turned around. "We will now visit the rock that is called Black Ben's Nose."

A few moments' brisk walk, along a beaten path, which led to it, sufficed to take them there.

This path passed almost under one side of the rock, to a point a few rods beyond it, where another path crossed it at right angles, and here the detective paused and referred to the unfinished letter which he carried in his pocket.

"You go down to Black Ben's Nose and turn to the——" he read, and stopped.

Plainly this was a circumstance where there were two things to do.

There was no doubt that if the next word had been written there it would have been "right" or "left," and since Black Ben Battles had been struck down before he could write that word, it followed that the detective must search both ways.

He turned to Miriam quizzically, and asked:

"When, in your wanderings about the country near Hampton, England, you came to a turn, indifferent as to which way you should pursue, what was your natural course? To the right, or to the left?"

"To the left, inevitably," she replied.

"I will search in that direction first," he said, and started rapidly along the cross path to the left. This led them again toward the lake; but, as Nick pursued this path, it swerved in a semicircular direction toward the right until finally it ran parallel with the pathway he had been following originally; and so, presently, he came to a narrow roadway through the woods.

"There is nothing here," he said, looking first in one and then in the other direction along the road. "We will go back and try the other way."

In a couple of minutes they arrived at the spot where the two paths crossed. Thence Nick continued on in the direction which would have been to the right had he followed that course at first. The path now led them more deeply into the woods, bearing somewhat to their right until it made a sharp turn and came out upon the top of a bluff which reached out directly over Round Pond, and at a height that was forty or fifty feet above the water.

Standing there and looking out across the small lake and around its shores, Nick could see that, although it was surrounded by rising ground in every direction, this was the only spot where there was anything that at all resembled a cliff.

He walked out to the extremity of the bluff, and stood there for a long time, approaching near enough to the edge to look over it to the pebbly shore of the lake beneath him.

He suddenly uttered an exclamation of amazement, and, turning suddenly, he told Miriam to wait for him. He then ran along the path to the lower ground, and thence around the side of the bluff to the shore of the pond.

Halting beside the lake, the detective found that the water, even near the shore, was of considerable depth, and that it would be necessary for him to swim, rather than wade, to the object that had attracted his attention. This object, as he had viewed it from the top of the bluff, lay at the bottom of the pond, and was of a yellowish-white color. Near it, well off from the shore and rocking slightly as it tugged at a rope, which, apparently, was attached to an anchor or stone that now lay at the bottom of the pond, was a small rowboat, which contained only a pair of oars, a large square of canvas, and a man's wearing apparel.

Screened by a clump of bushes, Nick quickly removed his garments, then, running forward, he plunged into the pond. A few vigorous strokes brought him to the empty boat, but scarcely had he reached its side when he took a deep breath and dived.

The famous detective was under the surface only a few moments. When he reappeared, he was grasping the nude body of a youth.

Nick Carter now headed for the shore, and, reaching this, he drew out of the water the body which he had found at the bottom of the pond.

As the detective looked at the features of the dead youth, he knew that he was none other than young Jack Brayton!

But the detective's work was not yet done. Hastening to the bushes in which he had left his clothes, he took from one of the pockets of his trousers a large clasp knife. This he thrust between his teeth as he plunged into the water of the pond again. Once more he dived, and when he returned to the surface he grasped one end of the rope which he had severed. Retaining his hold on the rope, he now proceeded to tow the boat to the shore.

Having again issued from the water, he drew the boat well up on the shore, and then covered the body of the dead youth with the piece of canvas which he took from the little craft. This done, he hurried to the bushes and donned the garments he had removed a few minutes before.

CHAPTER VIII.

A COMPLEX MYSTERY.

As Nick Carter set off in search of the young woman he had left at the top of the bluff, he thought quickly.

A hurried examination of the body he had found had failed to reveal to the detective any evidence of violence. The dead youth's clothes had been carefully arranged in the bow of the boat, and from the appearance of these, as well as from the appearance of the body itself, it would have been natural to infer that young Brayton, having risen early, had gone off alone in the boat for the purpose of taking a morning swim, and that, having undressed himself, he had plunged into the pond, where he had been seized with cramps and drowned.

But with this inference Nick Carter was far from being satisfied, for his thoughts reverted to the murder of Black Ben. He found himself speculating on what that letter might have contained had the writer been permitted to finish it. All these speculations were vain, however.

When Nick arrived at the place at which he had left Miriam, he found her seated thoughtfully beside a large boulder. As her eyes sought his face, she was quick to discover that while he had been away from her something had occurred to intensify the expression of gravity his features had worn when he had left her.

"What is it, Mr. Carter?" the young woman asked, almost breathlessly.

The detective shook his head.

"There has been another tragedy this morning, Miriam," he answered quietly. "I regret to say that I have bad news to take to Mr. Brayton."

An exclamation of dismay escaped the young woman's lips, and an expression of horror overspread her face.

"You—you don't mean that—that his nephew——" she faltered.

The detective nodded.

"Yes," he said; then he briefly described the finding of the body and the boat.

Taking the canvas-covered body of the youth in his arms, the detective, sending Miriam on ahead of him, returned to Mr. Brayton's house. There, aided by two of the servants, he placed his burden in one of the rooms.

Nick Carter, thoroughly perplexed by the singular aspects of the case, then went down to the library of his host, to await the appearance of Brayton. Seating himself here, he again addressed himself to a review of

the observations he had made in the course of the morning. Once more he told himself that the circumstances seemed to indicate that the unfortunate lad had stolen out to go bathing in the lake, and that, while alone, he had been drowned.

Had the thing happened any other morning in the week or any other day than when it did happen, this must have been the undoubted assumption, because of two facts which appeared later. One of these facts was that young Brayton repeatedly had asked permission to do that very thing since he had lived in his uncle's house, and the other was, that he had been expressly forbidden to swim in the lake for the double reason that it was very deep and treacherous, and the water was exceedingly cold.

It might easily have been assumed, therefore, that he had run away from the house early that morning to go in swimming, but for two facts which rendered such a conclusion impossible.

Then, too, there was to be considered the presence of the girl, Miriam, in the lad's bed after he had been taken out of it some time during the night, and the engagement he had with his uncle to go fishing that morning, which would have precluded any such independent action on his part. Nor did the detective forget the footprints he had found near the piazza under the window of young Brayton's room.

When Nick Carter seated himself, to think over logically and consecutively these matters, he was confronted by quite a new aspect of the cause, but just as he was about to consider this, the door of the library was opened and John Brayton entered.

The man had already been informed of the terrible thing that had happened, and had had time to compose himself. But his face was drawn and haggard, and there were deep lines under his eyes, as he seated himself opposite the detective.

"Well?" he asked. "You found him, I see."

"Yes," said Nick, "I found something else, too, Mr. Brayton."

"What is that?"

"I have discovered that the two amazing things that happened in your house last night apparently had no connection with each other."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the persons who abducted your nephew had no knowledge of the existence of the girl, Miriam. I also mean that the people who brought Miriam here and put her into that bed in Jack's room had no previous knowledge of him, whatever they may have found out last night."

"Great Heaven!" cried Brayton. "Two of them?"

"Two of what?"

"Two conspiracies working against my house at the same time?"

"Apparently so."

"But what does it all mean?"

"I can't answer that question just now."

"What could it mean?"

"I don't know, Mr. Brayton."

"But why should Jack be taken out of his room in the dead of night and be carried to the lake and drowned there after the manner that one uses in riding oneself of superfluous kittens or puppies?"

"I don't know. There is a design behind it that I cannot determine yet. But if you will ask me what it might have meant that the girl should be brought here, I can advance a theory which may or may not be anywhere near the fact."

"But, Carter, one incident must be connected with the other."

"In the abstract, very likely; in the concrete, I do not think so."

"What do you mean by the abstract and the concrete? I confess that I do not understand you at all."

"My theory in regard to Miriam is only a theory, and may not be even probable, but, in this day of conspiracies to get money, anything that is at all plausible is possible. It would seem to me that it was the intention of the people who brought Miriam to this country from England to provide you with an heiress to the fortune that you will leave behind you when you die. It would appear, if I am at all correct, that this scheme was outlined in their minds more than two years ago, and before it was ever dreamed of that you had a natural heir in your brother's son. It would seem that they had gone ahead with their preparations and had carried them out almost to the point of fulfillment at the very time when your nephew was brought here to live with you; and it would seem that the only connection between the two cases might exist in the possible fact that some of the conspirators, being here on the spot and witnessing the arrival of young Jack, sought to get him out of the way before the rest of the conspirators, whose duty it was to supply the heiress, could fill their part of the contract. That is the way the case stands now."

Brayton leaned forward in his chair, resting both arms upon the table between them, and asked sharply:

"Do you mean to infer that Miriam Archer is, or was, a party to the conspiracy that you suggest?"

"By no means, Mr. Brayton."

"Supposing it to be true, the thing you have suggested—I say, supposing it to be true, for I don't for a moment believe it is—do you regard her as entirely innocent of all knowledge of the affair?"

"I most certainly do."

Brayton leaned back again in his chair and said:

"Have you a cigar about you, Carter? I think it will do me good to smoke it. I am very much upset by all that has happened since daylight this morning."

"I am not surprised that you are," the detective replied, producing the cigar and lighting one himself.

"Let us discuss it a little further," said Brayton.

"Willingly, Mr. Brayton, for there are some questions that I would like to ask of you."

"Suppose you ask them, then, or, first, let me ask one myself."

"Very well, what is it?"

"Who could concoct such a monstrous thing as you suggest? Who would have any reason to do so? Who could suppose that such an unheard-of thing could be consummated?"

"Any set of two or three or more scheming crooks could do that, Mr. Brayton. There is nothing too monstrous for their undertaking, once they are satisfied of the merest chance of success, and nothing appeals to their class so much as something that is entirely new."

Brayton nodded.

"Perhaps that is true," he said. "Just now I am too greatly shocked to be capable of comprehending anything very clearly. What are the questions that you wanted to ask?"

"Some things about Black Ben—which reminds me that I have not yet told you of my visit to his cabin, or what I found there."

"No; you may tell me that at your leisure. What is it you want to ask?"

"You say that he has lived upon this place since you were a boy?"

"Yes, and before that time."

"He does not appear to be much older than yourself."

"He has looked as old as he does now for twenty years or more."

"How old, then, should you say he was?"

"Seventy at the least computation; and I should say nearer eighty than seventy."

"A remarkably well preserved man, then," said Nick.

"Undoubtedly."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"Oh, yes; I see him frequently."

"Do you see him to talk with him? That is, do you get near enough to him, when you do see him, to observe him closely?"

"No. Now that you speak of it, I have seen him only at a distance, and through the trees, or across the water of the lake, for a long time."

"How long a time?"

"Two or three years."

"Which? Two, or three?"

"Nearer three than two; perhaps more than that."

"If he had been absent from this place for an extended time—two or three years ago—would you have known about it?"

"I certainly would."

"Has he been so absent?"

"I am positive that he has not been away from here for more than a week at a time—or two at the most—in thirty years."

Nick Carter left his chair and said:

"I want you to take a walk with me, Mr. Brayton. I want you to go to Black Ben's cabin in the woods with me, and I may as well prepare you for what you will see. Black Ben is dead. He has been murdered. He was struck on the back of his head with a shoemaker's hammer in the hands of a woman—I think. Never mind expressing what you feel just now, for I want to add this to what I have already said, and for you to think over while we are on our way to the cabin."

"Well?"

"The things that you have told me about Black Ben Battles and his age, taken in connection with what I have seen at his cabin to-day and also in the light of something that Miriam told me, convinces me that the Black Ben who was killed very early this morning, probably, is not the same Black Ben you knew when you were a boy."

CHAPTER IX.

JOHN BRAYTON'S DEFIANCE.

The two men stood together over the body of Black Ben Battles, looking down upon it. Nick Carter waited for Brayton to speak first; but, as the latter continued to study with close scrutiny the features of the dead man, the detective finally said:

"Well, Mr. Brayton, what is your conclusion?"

"Why, he was a younger-looking man and a much better-looking man than I had supposed."

"Would you say that he was past seventy?"

"No—nor sixty. His appearance now is less than that."

"Can you tell me if he is the same man you knew when you were a boy around here?"

"I am positive that he is not."

"And yet, until this moment, you have never doubted that this man who lived in this cabin of late was the same Black Ben Battles you knew when you were a boy?"

"No, I have not doubted. It has not occurred to me to do so."

"Could you suggest when the change might have taken place?"

"Hardly that."

"Think a moment."

"I am doing so."

"When was the last time that you held conversation with Black Ben?"

"Three years ago—as much as that, certainly."

"Was he an older-looking man then than this one is now?"

"A much older-looking man. There were wrinkles and crow's-feet about his face, and near his eyes—oh, he was an entirely different man. This is not the same one at all."

"I suppose, then, that, if you stop to think of it, you would say that this man has purposely avoided you of late—that he has purposely avoided coming near enough to you to hold converse, and that he has managed to keep himself out of your sight save at a distance great enough so that you would not notice him particularly."

"Yes."

"Yet you say that this man looks like the other one whom you did know."

"Particularly like him—very much like him, indeed."

"So, if the other man was approaching eighty and this one here, judging from his appearance, was rather less than sixty years of age, this one might well have been the son of the other one."

"Yes; that is how it impresses me."

"Mr. Brayton, Miriam came to this cabin with me when I made this discovery. She stood outside while I came in here and found that this crime had been committed. Then she followed me to the door and I stepped outside with her for a moment, so that she need not see this unpleasant sight. After a little she came back in here with me, and the moment she looked upon the face of that dead man she seemed to recognize it. Then she told me of an encounter that she had had rather more than two years ago with a man upon a

highway in England—a man who looked like this one. It seems to me now that it is very likely that the man she saw over there was this man here; that he was the son of that other Black Ben that you knew when you were a boy, and it looks to me as if this conspiracy, which we are endeavoring to uncover, was concocted by this man, who induced his old father to take part in it. And, if I continue to read on as I am doing now, I should say that the unexpected death or disability from some cause of the elder man made it necessary for the younger one to come here to take his place."

"But what was the object?"

"Some scheme to find for you an heir for your fortune, Mr. Brayton."

"How would that benefit the conspirators?"

"We cannot read so far as that. We can only conjecture that their plans went far enough to provide for the ultimate delivery into their hands of whatever fortune you might leave after your death—and there isn't any doubt, if I am right in my theorizing, that your death was contemplated also, as soon as you had been brought to the point of making a will in favor of whosoever they might impose upon you."

"I am beginning to understand you, Mr. Carter."

Nick seated himself on the edge of the table, and, after a moment's silence, said:

"I must repeat something that I have already said. We are face to face with an enormous conspiracy which has two branches so distinct from each other as to be almost separate ones. The first one, we will say, began three years ago, presumably at the time of the death of Miriam Archer's mother, or subsequent to it. We will say that it grew out of the certain knowledge possessed by the original Black Ben concerning you and your family, your wealth, and your probable disposal of it at your death."

"Please go on, Mr. Carter, you are interesting me."

"I am going on, and I want you to listen closely to what I say."

"I will."

"We might as well assume that this man visited his father about that time; that he is, or was, an English crook and a plotter and schemer; that they knew you had no relatives to whom you could leave your wealth, and that the original Black Ben had studied your character sufficiently since your boyhood to know that you would gladly accept the right person as your heir or heiress. The fortune that you would leave behind you was large enough to make the game they sought to play worth while, and they had only to find a youth or a girl who was practically as alone in the world as

yourself and your wife in order to carry out the plot which suggested itself to them.

"So this girl, Miriam, was thought of. Doubtless, it was known to them at that time that her mother could live only a short while, and so their scheme doubtless was to bring the girl to this country, as they did, and to introduce her into your family in some way that would attract you to her and that would lead you to adopt her and so to make her the principal beneficiary under your will.

"Just what their method of procedure might have been after that point was accomplished is difficult to determine, and is not worth our while to consider now. But, if we assume that such was their scheme, we find that they proceeded with it far enough to begin its accomplishment before the accident of the discovery of your nephew, the rightful heir, could affect their plan.

"This dead man here was on the ground at this place waiting to render his assistance when the proper moment should arrive, and if we further assume that he had no means of immediate communication with his coconspirators, we can account for the abduction and death of young Jack, and for the introduction into his room of this girl, by the simplest form of deduction.

"This man who is dead probably witnessed with considerable consternation the arrival of young Jack and his installation into your family as your heir. If so, he saw at once the necessity of getting Jack out of the way without delay, and he either sent for two of his pals who were somewhere near at hand, or he induced a couple of yeggmen to assist him in the abduction of Jack from his room last night. Doubtless he had received a letter telling him of the expected arrival of the girl.

"A strange circumstance, which forms itself into a coincidence, must have brought the girl here at almost the very moment when Jack was taken away, and, while the two affairs had no connection with each other in the beginning, they were brought together at the end, because, to carry out their plot as they had planned it, the girl could not be sent back once she was here, and the boy had doubtless already been taken from the room and sent to his death when Miriam was brought here.

"So you see there was nothing else for them to do but what they did do.

"Assuming that this dead man, at the last moment, received word of the time when the girl was to be brought here, he having already made the appointment with the two men who assisted him in the abduction of Jack—assuming that he would tell his two helpers to

wait until he consulted with those who were to arrive, and that he went to meet the latter, holding the others in the leash, so to speak, for a few hours, and that those others went ahead with the original plan, and carried the boy to the lake and drowned him as they had been told to do, the circumstance would have left everything in the air for the conspirators unless they carried out their original intention."

"That would presuppose that Jack was already dead when Miriam was brought to my house."

"Yes—just as it would presuppose that this Black Ben, the second, was unable to control the men who had been directed to put him out of the way."

"Well, Mr. Carter?"

"This unfinished letter that the man attempted to write was intended for you. It would have been a betrayal of the entire scheme had he been able to complete it. But there is a woman in this affair somewhere, for I found the marks of her heels in the sod beside the ladder marks under the piazza at your house, and I found them here. I made a cast of them with clay, and I am satisfied that they are the same. So that brings the two conspiracies together. It was found when Miriam was brought here that there was only one thing to do, and that was to go ahead with the original plans. To stop at that moment would be to foil them all. To go ahead with them was the only way, and there was still the gambler's chance that it might succeed."

"Does all this bring us any nearer to the solution of the mystery?" Brayton asked.

"I think it does."

"Will it help to find for me the murderer of my nephew?"

"I think it will."

"That is all I seek now, Mr. Carter. I have no interest in these plots and schemes and conspiracies. I have no interest in the girl, other than that I am sorry for her. And I am quite willing to believe, as you suggest, that she is an entirely innocent party in this affair."

"I haven't the slightest doubt that she is that?" said Nick, with emphasis.

"Find me the murderer, then, Mr. Carter."

"When we find the murderer of this person," and Nick Carter pointed to the dead man on the floor, "we will have found also the murderer of your nephew."

"I haven't a doubt of that, in the light of the letter you have shown me."

"And we will find at the head and front of it all this woman whom Miriam calls Mrs. Field, for I haven't

a doubt that she is the woman who stood beneath the window at the house at the foot of the ladder, or that she is the woman who came here to this cabin for an interview with Black Ben, and found him seated there at that table engaged in writing a letter. Here is the hammer with which she killed him. It was upon that cobbler's bench in the corner behind him. She came here silently along the path, making no sound whatever. She glided in at the open doorway without disturbing him. She saw the hammer and she saw him, too intent upon his occupation to heed her approach. The argument that she had expected to have with him was easier avoided than indulged in. She seized the hammer and struck the blow, then glided away into the obscurity that envelops her now, leaving only those marks of the heels of her shoes to identify her."

"Can you find her, then, Mr. Carter?"

"I will find her."

Suddenly John Brayton leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. For several moments his form shook with half-suppressed sobs; but he soon recovered himself and raised his head, with a new light of determination shining in his eyes.

"Find these people for me and bring them to justice, Carter," he said. "It is a terrible thing to have found Jack, only to lose him in this manner; it is a more terrible thing to feel that if I had left him where he was he still would be alive and might have grown to be a successful man without my interference. But fate has decreed otherwise; and so now, I say, Mr. Carter, if you can bring his murderers to justice, and if you can prove to my satisfaction that this girl, Miriam Archer, is absolutely an innocent party in all this terrible business, I swear that she shall become my heir as some sort of a recompense for the wrong that has been done to her and to me."

CHAPTER X.

A MONSTROUS CONSPIRACY.

They left the cabin together, again locking the door after them, and walked slowly and silently back toward the old mansion. They were almost there before the silence was broken; then Nick Carter said:

"It is my duty to remind you of one thing, Mr. Brayton."

"Well?"

"The conspiracy against your millions has not yet been fulfilled."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that the object has not been attained."

"Please explain."

"The introduction of the girl into your house, of whom you are supposed ultimately to become very fond, and to whom it was anticipated you would leave your fortune, was only one of the steps in the affair. You'll admit that."

"Yes."

"And we have agreed that the presence of Jack in your house and his taking off are merely incidental, so far as the conspiracy is concerned."

"Yes."

"The other steps in the conspiracy then remain to be taken."

"I follow you."

"First, it was relied upon that the girl would be sufficiently lovable to attract and hold the affection of your wife and yourself."

"Yes."

"Second, it was necessary to bring you to a condition of mind which would impress upon you the necessity of making a will, as soon as you were thought to be sufficiently fond of Miriam to make it in her favor."

"Well? Go on."

"That brings us to the consideration of your own position."

"Of my position?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that to carry out such a scheme as I have outlined two things were necessary to be done by the conspirators."

"What were these?"

"One might be to undermine your health to a point where you anticipated death in the near future. This could be accomplished by the administering of slow poison, like digitalis deftly introduced into your food. Digitalis is produced from a plant called foxglove, and, in its crude state, properly administered, will destroy one's health and vitality so subtly and thoroughly as to defy detection. That would be one way."

"Well?"

"Another would be to throw you into some kind of an accident where your life would be so endangered as to impress you with the desirability of making your will without delay."

"It all seems preposterous, Carter, but I do under-

stand you. It is all presupposing my fondness for this stranger so absurdly introduced into my family."

"Yes; but that much was taken for granted."

"Well?"

"That brings us to the next step in the conspiracy."

"Go on."

They had paused now on the steps leading up to the piazza.

"Having made your will in favor of the girl whom the conspirators introduced into your household, the next point would be to rid themselves of you and of your wife in order that she might inherit."

"Do you mean to say that they might intend to murder me and my wife, too?"

"Without a doubt."

Brayton was silent.

"That is the very point that I had in mind when I said I wished to remind you of something. Back there in the cabin, you figuratively defied these conspirators by saying to me that, if I could satisfy you of the entire innocence of Miriam, you would make her your heiress in spite of these people. It was my duty then to tell you that you are deliberately looking death in the face when you do so—and not only yourself, but Mrs. Brayton as well."

"I understand you, Carter; but you forget one thing."

"What is that?"

"How would these people benefit by my death and by Miriam's inheritance of my fortune, provided that she is the innocent party to this affair that you believe her to be—and that I also am willing to believe her to be?"

"I can't answer that just now, save to say that, of course, they must have a plan to meet that emergency. If Miriam inherited your fortune and herself died without making a will, the property would fall to her next of kin, and probably the conspirators have provided for that emergency in some manner, so that the fortune would go directly to one of these conspirators, probably the woman who has called herself Mrs. Field."

"But such a monstrous thing as you say would contemplate the murder of Miriam Archer, too, later on."

"Yes, it would."

John Brayton threw out his arms with the gesture of one who casts a burden from him.

"Go ahead with the matter in your own way, Carter," he said. "Just now I can see only two things. One is that my nephew lies dead in this house, having

been murdered, and the other is that the criminal must be brought to justice. I rely upon you to do that. As for that other dead man down there in the cabin——"

"I will use the telephone to notify the authorities," said the detective. "And now, if I may make a suggestion, you had best notify Mrs. Brayton of what has happened and go ahead with your arrangements for the funeral of Jack."

The detective remained upon the steps of the piazza while Brayton went into the house. Nick had been standing there only a few moments when Miriam came out to him.

"Mr. Carter," she said, "may I have a few words with you?"

"Certainly."

"I find myself in a very unfortunate and a very trying position."

"I appreciate that, Miriam," he replied.

"I am only a young girl, after all."

"I know."

"I am utterly destitute. I have not so much as a penny to my name or a jewel with which I could procure funds."

"That is true."

"I was brought here against my will. I had no voice whatever in the matter. I was a weak instrument in the hands of some designing person, whose identity I cannot even imagine, and, although you and Mr. Brayton have been extremely kind to me, the situation is an intolerable one."

"Yes, Miriam."

"I want to go away."

"Where?"

"I do not know. I want you to advise me."

"You have no place to go. You have no home, even in England. You came here to enter upon a new life which suddenly has faded out of your sight. You are as if you had been transported to a different planet."

"Entirely so. But it seems to me that I ought to be able to find something to do. I can work. I am not afraid of work."

"Are you unwilling to remain here?" he asked her.

"Under the circumstances, yes. I am unwilling to be utterly dependent upon any one."

"What if I should tell you that it is Mr. Brayton's desire that you remain, and that he wishes you to consider yourself as one of the family? What if I should assure you that he will ask you to make your home here with him and Mrs. Brayton, and——"

"It would make no difference, Mr. Carter."

"What if I should tell you that it is your duty to remain here?"

"You would have to prove that."

"I think I can do so."

"Well?"

"Two murders have been committed, Miriam, and they have both been done by the very people who brought you here; or, if not by those very persons, by others who were conspiring with them, so that it amounts to the same thing."

"Well?"

"Your assistance is needed to aid us—to aid me—in tracing those individuals. You have seen and could identify the persons who murdered the man who was known as Black Ben Battles."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I am referring to the woman you knew as Mrs. Field."

"Do you mean that she killed that man?"

"It seems to me that she must have done so."

"And the boy, also?"

"That she was instrumental in his death cannot be denied. It would be another matter to accuse her of holding him under the water until he drowned; but if she was not an actual participant in that crime, she has been an accessory since its commission, and is, therefore, as guilty as if she had actually done it herself."

"Then you think it is my duty to remain here?"

"It's your imperative duty, Miriam. We cannot very well proceed without you. I am going now to take the trail of these people, and I will follow them until I find them. I shall find that woman, and I shall confront her with you. When you have identified her as the woman who went to the hotel after you, and who took you into the country, leaving you at some obscure house for the night—the place from which you were abducted to be brought here—we will have a very pretty case of circumstantial evidence against her, and I will, by that time, have accumulated sufficient further evidence to fix these crimes and the whole monstrous conspiracy upon her and her associates."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECRET HIDING PLACE.

An hour before dark that evening the body of Black Ben was removed from the cabin near the lake.

Nick Carter and Miriam Archer gave the necessary

testimony concerning the discovery of the body of the murdered man, before it was taken away to the undertakers; then the door of the cabin was locked, and the key was delivered over to the detective at his request.

During the time that intervened before darkness settled down, Nick Carter occupied himself by going pretty thoroughly over the grounds and the house and by questioning the servants and some of the neighbors, none of whom lived very near, about the previous habits and career of Black Ben Battles.

At the conclusion of the part of his investigation, he had to confess himself to be as much in the dark as he was in the beginning.

All that could be gleaned in regard to the man has practically been told. It appeared, however, that he had been thought to be particularly morose and sullen for the last two or three years, studiously avoiding every person whom he had hitherto known.

But even such people were very few and far between because, as one of the persons whom Nick questioned expressed it:

"Black Ben always was an unsociable cuss, and never had much to do with anybody around here. He held himself aloof from us all, and would rarely answer by more than a monosyllable when he was spoken to. But, for all that, it has been noticed that he has changed mightily since two or three years ago."

That evening Nick sat for a considerable time in the library of the house with Brayton and Miriam, but there was very little said. Nick was not sorry when, shortly after Miriam had gone to the room that had been allotted to her, Brayton also bade him good night, for it had been arranged that the detective was to remain.

Alone in the library, he lighted and smoked another cigar, but, when that was finished, he arose and went softly out of the house and down the steps to the concreted roadway. Presently he was following that path through the woods which led to Black Ben's cabin.

Nick Carter had no definite purpose in making this adventure and in taking his steps toward the cabin near Black Ben's Nose; he did it almost mechanically—certainly without forethought.

The way through the woods was dark, although there was half a moon in the heavens and many stars. He could see his way well enough without a light, for much of the path was worn and well beaten.

In his pocket was the key to the cabin door, and the idea of spending a few minutes inside the place appealed to the detective in his present mood. Accord-

ingly, he entered the place and lighted the lamp that he had seen there on his former visits to the place.

There was left no trace of the crime that had been committed.

He seated himself upon the chair that had been fashioned from a barrel, and rested his elbow upon the table, with his eyes fixed upon the small fireplace in the rude chimney which had been built of such stones as could be picked up in the immediate vicinity.

The night was chilly, and he bethought himself, if he was to remain there, a fire would not be ungrateful. There was fuel in plenty piled in one corner near the fireplace, and he presently started a fire. Having supplied it with several sticks of hard wood, he turned the chair about, lighted a cigar, and sat before the blaze, with his feet outstretched to the warmth.

The time was midsummer, to be sure, but, nevertheless, the fire felt grateful to him, and he had not been in the mood to seek his bed at the house.

The interior of the place was scrupulously clean, as the body of the dead man who had lived there had been, for, whatever had been his previous calling in life, Black Ben had given particular care to the cleanliness and orderliness of his cabin home.

He had been seated there nearly half an hour, during which time his eyes had sought and studied every portion of the interior of the place, and he had lighted a fresh cigar when a bit of plaster from the chimney, dried by the heat, detached itself and fell upon the hearthstone that had been set in the earthen floor.

He raised his eyes to discover whence the plaster had come. He saw a hole not bigger than his thumb between two of the stones and one corner of the upper part of the chimney, and just above the level of his eyes, when he stood upright, as he did now.

It was not the small aperture between the stones that attracted him, but the fact that, as he looked upon the earth to the bit that had fallen from its place, he saw that it was of a different color from the rest. Bending forward to raise it, he picked up a piece of the same sort of blue clay that he had used to fashion the heel of the woman's shoe. This struck him as being odd, and he advanced nearer to the chimney to inspect the hole more closely. He discovered, then, that there was more clay at that part of the chimney from which this piece had fallen; it extended, in fact, the way around this particular stone from which the fallen piece had come.

It was sufficient to attract his curiosity, and he reached into a box upon a shelf, drew out a steel case

knife, and began to dig into the clay he had found. It came away easily and scattered itself upon the floor, disclosing the fact that it had been used merely as a temporary fastening to hold the stone in place.

It required only a moment for him to remove the stone and take it down, after which he raised himself upon tiptoe, and, using his electric torch, he peered into the aperture thus created.

He found that he was looking into a compartment that had been made in one side of the chimney and sufficiently far away from the heat of the fire to escape any effect from it. He could see also that there were several books and other articles inside the space, which was much larger than it at first appeared to be.

He thrust his arm inside and drew out one article after another.

The first book he took out was a Bible. He glanced at this with a smile, laid it upon the table, and reached into the hole again.

Then he drew forth a second book—a dictionary, much worn and thumbed, of a date only three years old, and published in London.

"An odd thing for an illiterate chap to have—a fellow who had to print his letters because he could not write," Nick thought, as he laid it aside and proceeded with his investigation.

The next article that his fingers encountered was an ink bottle, half filled, and some pens and a pencil lying beside it. He drew those out and placed them beside the books, and then extracted a pad of paper and a package of envelopes.

Again thrusting his hand inside the place, he came upon a tightly rolled bundle which had been crowded as far back as possible and was tied together securely with a stout cord. He removed the string, disclosing an old waistcoat, inside of which had been wrapped an old leather pocketbook, with a strap and buckle around it. He laid these upon the table beside the other things he had found.

The next thing he discovered was a packet containing half a dozen letters in envelopes which bore London postmarks and English stamps. These letters were plainly addressed to Benjamin Battles, Esq., at the post office where John Brayton received his mail.

There was nothing else to be found in the hole in the chimney, so Nick drew the chair to the table again and began to examine the articles he had placed upon it.

The letters were well written in good English, and were signed "Ben." With one exception they were

merely ordinary communications from a son to his father whom he had not seen for many years, and for whom he had very little, if any, affection.

But these letters established the fact that the original Ben Battles had had a son and had been in communication with him in England; and thus was one of the theories of the detective already established.

It was the last of these letters which particularly attracted the attention of the detective, for it said, in closing:

"All that you have told me in your letters about the place where you live, and the people who own it, has caused me to decide to make you a visit, and so you need not answer this, but may look for me at any time within the next two weeks."

The date of that letter was two years and nine months, almost to a day, before Nick Carter read it.

Underneath the signature was a postscript which contained these words:

"If there are any good cribs to crack around that vicinity, without robbing the man whose place you live on, I may decide to stay with you. Anyhow, I've got a scheme to suggest, which I would rather say in words than write about, and which my woman thinks ought to make us all rich for life."

This information was not much, although it was satisfying to the detective to have found it, for not only did it prove that old Ben Battles had had a son who had determined to visit him, at or near the time when Miriam must have encountered him on the highway in England, but it suggested that already in that son's mind was forming the plan of some conspiracy, the fulfillment of which required the father's coöperation.

The Bible was much thumbed and worn, as if the old man had been in the habit of reading it diligently, and the dictionary showed such constant use that Nick was satisfied that the original Black Ben had made frequent use of it. Also the detective was certain that the man who had been murdered in that very cabin so lately had had no knowledge of that hole in the chimney and its contents.

The paper and envelopes which Nick had taken from the hole were clean and fresh, but the pen was rusty and corroded with ink, and showed evidence of having been much in use. The ink bottle was only half full.

These things caused Nick to believe that somewhere about that old cabin there were things which its former occupant had written, and he wondered, as he left his chair to make a thorough search, if the old chap had not perhaps kept some sort of a diary, or journal.

The old man undoubtedly had been of a religious turn of mind, as the much-used Bible demonstrated; doubtless he had lived the solitary life of a hermit because of that fact, and had remained far away from his son because of the latter's calling, which the reference to cracking cribs plainly revealed.

But, although the detective searched everywhere about the place, he could find no spot where papers or other books other than those he found could be concealed, and he had about concluded, if there was such a hiding place, it was somewhere out in the woods, when his gaze fell again upon the hearthstone that was set into the earthen floor. It was an oblong square of granite and once had been polished, but it was strikingly out of place in an earthen floor where no hearthstone was needed. Nick took the lamp over from the table, put it beside the stone, and got down upon his knees to examine it more closely.

He was not long in discovering that the earth near the center of either end of the oblong stone was loose, and he easily scraped it away with his fingers, thus disclosing the fact that there was a small round hole, not much larger than an ordinary wire nail in size, at each end of it.

The size of these holes suggested the wire nails, for he had discovered a box containing some rusty nails of that description on one of the shelves.

He procured two of them, and, with one in either hand, thrust them into the holes in the stone, thus forming a leverage upon which he could lift. He then found, not at all to his surprise, that the stone came up easily from a square in the earthen floor into which it fitted perfectly.

And there, in a receptacle made of the exact size to contain it, was a japanned tin box, such as bankers use in which to deposit documents which are left in their vaults for safe-keeping. He lifted this out by the handle and put it upon the table while he sought in his pocket for his picklock with which to open it.

Here, then, was the repository in which the original Black Ben, father of the murdered man, had deposited some of his treasures.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONTENTS OF THE TIN BOX.

It seemed to Nick Carter, before he opened that tin box, that already he could guess what it must contain, for in the presence of the Bible and the dictionary, the

ink, pens, pencils, and stationery, he could determine something of the character of the strange old man who had inhabited that cabin before his wayward son had come from England, perhaps to murder him.

In no way, however, did he really anticipate what he did find, for even his theories were not equal to that.

Nevertheless, he felt, as he lifted the lid of the box, that he was on the eve of a discovery of some sort which would benefit materially him in the search he was making; and he was already well pleased that he had come to the cabin to pass a part of the night.

Inside the box, and lying neatly across it, exactly fitting into the size of it, was a square of blue blotting paper. This the detective lifted out of the way, thus disclosing a neat assortment of packages of letters and documents, some of which had the appearance of legal papers.

There were two envelopes, yellowed with time, which contained photographs. These were the faces of persons who did not interest the detective, so he cast them aside; but beneath them was another envelope of the same sort which contained three more photographs, and these made the detective utter a low whistle the instant his eyes rested upon them.

The first one of the three, with a few slight points of difference, might have been the face and the features of Miriam Archer that looked up at him from the faded photograph.

So here was established already some sort of association between that strange old man who had occupied the cabin while John Brayton was a boy, and Miriam Archer; or between that man and Miriam Archer's mother, for Nick determined at once that the pictured face before him must have been the girl's mother.

He gazed upon it for a moment, then he laid it aside while he took up the second photograph, which already had attracted his attention, and which he had already discovered to be, undoubtedly, a likeness of the man who so recently had been murdered in that room.

True, it was a picture that had been taken long ago, when the man, now dead, was yet in his youth, just as the other picture must have been of Miriam's mother when she was only a girl; but there was the association between the two, undoubtedly.

Then the third picture!

Its presence and the character of it seemed to reply to the questions that the detective would have asked after he had seen the others.

It was the likeness of a man somewhat under middle

age—a man who had been almost the counterpart of that dead man Nick had found in that room, only handsomer. In the picture he was holding two children, one upon either knee. In the face of the younger of the two—a girl—the detective could detect a strong resemblance to the first of the pictures he had looked at and which he had decided was Miriam's mother. This satisfied him upon the instant of the identity of Miriam Archer.

There could be not the slightest doubt that the strange old man, who had come to America to make a hermit of himself, had been the grandfather of this girl, who had been introduced into the home of John Brayton so strangely; just as there could be not the slightest doubt that the dead man found on the floor of the cabin near the lake was Miriam's uncle.

So this explained, in part, how such a conspiracy, such as Nick Carter had been able to outline, had been possible of formation by Ben Battles, the younger, who had come to America to carry it out, pursued, doubtless, later on by the person to whom he had referred in one of his letters to his father as "my woman."

Nick thought he could see it all now. He could imagine now how this woman, probably the wife of the younger Ben, had been left behind to engineer the fine points of the conspiracy on the other side so far as it referred to the girl who was to be introduced into the family of John Brayton.

He could understand how, upon the arrival of the younger Ben in America, he had found his father unwilling to participate in any such monstrous thing as was suggested.

So here, in these photographs, was more of the history of Miriam Archer than she had been able to tell herself; here was the fact as to one side of her parentage, as also was the assumption that, although she was related to a man who could concoct and carry out such a monstrous thing as this conspiracy, she had had no part in it and had simply been used as an instrument.

But there were the letters still to examine, and Nick Carter addressed himself to the task eagerly, confident now that he would find in them the solution of the problems which still vexed him.

We need not go through those letters as he did. Suffice it to say that instead of spending an hour or two in that cabin, as had been his intention when he entered it, he passed the rest of the night there, reading and making notes and evolving deductions from what he read.

But he did find well-kept diaries of the old man, and

these covered many of the years he had passed in America. They set forth explicitly his determination to leave his own country and why he had done so, and of his satisfaction at finding the place by the lake where he could build a little cabin in which he expected to pass the remainder of his life.

He had been a religious enthusiast of the Wesleyan type, austere and narrow in character and outlook, and the sins of his son who had twice been in prison before his departure from England had determined him in the thing he did.

But we need not go into all those particulars here.

Even the son at the last moment of this last act of his had repented of it, and had sought to remedy it when it was too late to apply a remedy. And he had himself fallen a victim to his own plottings; he had been "hoist by his own petard," and with him had died, in all probability, the last living relative that Miriam Archer had, at least on her mother's side of the family.

Nick Carter, by the perusal of the packets of letters, the diary, and other things found in the tin box underneath the hearthstone in the cabin home of Miriam's grandfather, had cleared up many of the most puzzling points that had presented themselves to him with such complexity, and while the theories advanced by him had partly accounted for the discovery of Miriam Archer in the room and bed that had been young Jack Brayton's, it was, as yet, not much more than a theory.

But the detective was no nearer to the discovery of the actual murderer, or murderers, than he had been in the beginning, save in so far as he had some specific knowledge of the existence of a woman in the plot who was probably the brains and energy of it.

"Was that woman the wife of this man who was killed here in this cabin, and did she slay her own husband?" was the question he asked of himself, as he had finished confiding the several articles he had found there to a package he had tied carefully together and carried with him when he left it, as he supposed for the last time.

Day was just breaking, and he hastened along the path to the house and up to the room that had been assigned to him. Here he locked the package carefully away in an oak cabinet that he found there, placing the key to it in his pocket.

He next descended to the library, where he wrote, sealed, and addressed the following note to John Brayton:

"I have spent the night in the cabin of Black Ben

Battles. I found there many things of interest, among which are photographs and letters which establish the identities of the original Black Ben, of the later one, who was his son, and, strange to say, also of Miriam Archer, who is related to them. I am going now to follow an idea which has just occurred to me. It is likely that, during the early part of the day, you will receive a telephone call from my assistant, Mr. Garvan, to whom I wish you would say that he is to come out here directly with whatsoever information he may have, and is to remain here until I return, in case I should not be here when he arrives, or until he hears from me by telephone at your house. I wish to add to this the statement that, although I have said that Miriam is a relative of Black Ben Battles, I do not believe she has any knowledge of the fact, and I would not advise that she be told. I will add also that I have found enough in the letters, legal documents, and photographs discovered at the cabin to convince me that the Battles originally were of good family, and that it was the unnatural acts of the son who was killed here yesterday which drove the father into exile and made him live the life of a hermit. I will have more to add to this when I see you, which may be within a few hours or days, I cannot now determine which."

The detective next wrote a short note to Miriam Archer. It was as follows:

"MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND: I do not wish that the fact that I may be absent from here some little time shall render you any less determined to remain where you are so long as I may have need of you. I have the assurance, as well as the expressed wish, of Mr. Brayton, that he will be greatly pleased if you will make this house your home for an indefinite time. At all events, I expect you to remain and be as contented as possible until you see me again. The small inclosure, which I include with this, is intended only to render it impossible for you to say again that you are entirely penniless. (Signed) NICHOLAS CARTER."

The sun was just rising over the tops of the trees when Nick Carter again emerged into the open air and hastened back again, not to the cabin this time, but by a fork from the path that led to it. He made his way to the boathouse which has been before referred to.

It was an easy matter for him to pick the simple padlock with which the door was fastened, and he quickly drew out one of the boats, with which he at once began to make a circuit of the lake shore, a thing which he could do by rowing rather more than three miles.

It has been said that the lake was almost circular in form, and was approximately a mile across it in any direction.

Except where the bluff was located, the shore sloped

gradually to the water's edge and was either sandy or pebbly all the way around.

In the bright light of that clear morning, the detective was certain that he could readily see from the boat any tracks or marks that might have been left upon the beach at any point of it, and because he had already determined that the woman, after visiting the cabin and striking down with a hammer the man she found there, had left that immediate locality in a boat, he felt confident that he would somewhere find just such tracks; and that was what he now sought.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRACKED ON COUNTRY ROADS.

We need not suppose that Nick Carter intended to make the entire circuit of the lake when he started to row; but it was not logical to suppose that any person in rowing across the lake to escape from the immediate vicinity would land again upon the same side of it or within a few rods of the starting point.

Therefore, when the detective started to row, he went diagonally across the lake toward the northeast, and then turned to follow the shore along that portion of it which would cover approximately a third of its circumference.

The search occupied only a short time, and, at last, the detective came upon what he sought—the plain and unmistakable marks of the prow of a small boat where it had been drawn up on the sand, and, beyond that, the scraping trail of the boat where it had been drawn across the pebbly beach to some bushes that grew on higher ground.

Nick Carter stepped ashore there, and, having pulled up his boat, hastened to the bushes where, as he had expected, he found another boat concealed.

More than twenty-four hours had elapsed since the boat was left there, but there were broken boughs and trodden leaves and grasses plainly visible. A little farther up the bank, where there was a hollow and where the ground was moist and marshy from a spring near by, there were tracks which he examined carefully with the aid of his magnifying glass.

Thus the detective determined that there had been four persons in the party which had crossed the small lake in the boat.

Beyond the marshy spot no tracks were visible, but Nick could follow the general direction of them. This was through a glade in the woods to a wood road which presently took him to the highway at a point which he

seemed to recognize, and which, after a few moments' observation, he decided was quite near to the first pathway he had followed according to the directions in Black Ben's unfinished letter.

Hurrying forward, he came upon the place where horses attached to some sort of vehicle had trampled the ground while waiting, and there was no doubt now in his mind that it was to this point that the people had brought Miriam when they had taken her to the house of John Brayton.

Satisfied of this, Nick devoted himself to a careful scrutiny of the marks upon the ground, and, although he made no notes, he carefully jotted down in his memory everything that he did see, so that when, after half an hour of this expert examination, he arose to his feet and started away, he was convinced that he had a fairly good knowledge of both of the horses, and at least enough of the description of the vehicle itself for a farmer or a countryman, who notices such things, to recognize and recall upon hearing.

It was easy to determine which direction had been taken when the horses were driven away, and he continued on, though twenty-four hours or more had passed since the departure of the vehicle.

By returned to Brayton's place, the detective might have obtained his automobile, but he knew that there was no use in following along this route, farther than to pass a few of the dwelling houses on the road, for if he could not obtain information from some one who lived in one of them, it was certain that he would not be able to pursue the trail at all.

Those who have been in the country know that a genuine countryman recognizes instantly by sight every horse and vehicle with which he is at all familiar; and also that there is nothing which will attract the attention of such a person more than a horse and vehicle that is strange to him.

At the first house where the detective made inquiries, nothing whatever was to be learned. At the second one, the farmer remembered to have seen the tail end of a wagon with three or four persons in it disappearing over the brow of the hill, bound in the direction away from Brayton's, just as he came out of the house on the preceding morning to do his chores.

At the third house, more than two miles away from his starting point, he came upon the information that he sought.

"Yes, sir," said the man of whom he made the inquiries, "I did see just such a thing as you're asking about—yesterday morning just before sunup. It was

a two-seated democrat wagon, with three men and a woman in it. At first I couldn't see them well enough to be certain that they was Sim Spaulding's mixed team."

"What do you mean by mixed team?" Nick asked him.

"Why, just what you said—a gray and a sorrel."

"Who is Sim Spaulding?"

"Sim keeps the livery at Bixby Four Corners."

"Where is that?"

"About a dozen miles from here, we call it. You see, Sim is my son-in-law. He used to drive over here and spark my Angelina until finally he got tired of setting up with her and married her. I know most every horse he's got."

For the moment the detective was in a quandary whether to return to Brayton's house and secure his own car, thus losing considerable time, or to seek some conveyance at the spot where he was; but the query was answered for him by the sudden tooting of an automobile horn, and he saw approaching him, traveling in the direction that he wanted to go, a touring car that contained only one occupant.

The detective lifted his right hand, signaling to the driver of the car, who came to a stop, and Nick clambered into the seat beside the man before he had asked a question; then as the man hesitated to start onward, without knowing why he had been hailed, Nick said concisely:

"If you would aid me in the capture of a murderer, drive me to Bixby Four Corners as quickly as you can do it."

"You bet," said the man and started the car. Then he added: "The chap who killed Black Ben Battles?"

"Yes," answered Nick.

"How do you know that they went to Bixby Four Corners?"

"They drove a team that belonged to Sim Spaulding."

"Good. I know Sim. I'll take you there. He's my cousin."

"Sim seems to be related to everybody in the neighborhood," laughed Nick.

"What did they kill Black Ben for?" the man asked.

"Ask me that to-morrow and perhaps I may tell you. Just now I want to think."

We need not recount the questions which followed and the terse answers which Nick Carter gave, but it may be assumed that this chauffeur of the car, which had seen better days in the long ago, did everything in his power to prevent Nick Carter from thinking during that drive to Bixby Four Corners.

Sim Spaulding's information was direct and to the point when Nick Carter arrived there. He remembered the party that had driven away from his stable early in the evening of the night before the last. There had been two men only, and these had engaged the

team and the two-seated democrat to drive to Creighton, fifteen miles away and in the opposite direction to the one which Nick Carter knew they had taken. But they had left an ample deposit for the use of the team, and Spaulding said he didn't care if they never got the horses and wagon back again.

The horses and wagon had been returned, however, about two hours after daylight, and by the same two men who had taken them away. Spaulding had seen nothing of a woman or of a third man.

But there was a railway station not far distant, and it might have been that they picked up the others there and left them at that place when their trip was finished. It was possible, too, that they had intercepted some other vehicle—a car or a wagon—and taken their extra passengers from it.

Right here occurred one of those happy accidents which sometimes bring about great results in the life of individuals. One might name it luck or chance, or call it the intervention of Providence where it brings about a desired and worthy consequence.

At all events, while Nick Carter was talking with Sim Spaulding, a man who stood near to them whitening a stick, and very palpably listening to what they were saying, moved himself forward with this interruption:

"Say, mister, I think I can tell you something about what you want to know."

"Well," said Nick. "What is it?"

"I own a farm, a little more than a mile back of here, that I bought at a foreclosure sale about a year ago. It's got an old tumble-down house on it that ain't been lived in for the Lord knows how long. Lately tramps got in the habit of sleeping in that old house. Night before last I went over there to sleep myself, just to give them the idea that the place was inhabited and they couldn't frequent it any more. There didn't any tramps come that night, but, along toward morning, I was woke up by hearing voices down by the gate. When I peeked out of the window there was two men tinkering with an automobile that had got into some sort of trouble, because, although they cranked it over and over again, they couldn't make it budge. There was two women inside the car, and, while I watched them, they never dreaming that there was anybody alive in the house, they pushed the car out of the road into the lane and the two men went away, leaving the two women sitting in the car. One of the women seemed to be sound asleep, with her head on the other one's shoulder.

"I was for going out and asking them what was the matter, but I cal'lated it wasn't any business of mine, and so I let them be; but I watched them.

"Mebbe it was half or three quarters of an hour later—mebbe more—when back comes the two men driving Sim Spaulding's mixed team, hitched to a two-seated democrat. Then the whole bunch of them piled into that wagon and drove away by the road that leads around to the north of this place, to Round Lake. I

went out a little later and had a look at the car they had left there, and I found a note tied to the steering wheel, which said: 'Please let this car stand where it is until called for.'

"What more?" asked the detective.

"That's all."

"You did not wait there until they returned?"

"No."

"Did you by any chance take the license number of that car?"

"I sure did. You can bet your life on that."

"What was it?"

"It was a license issued by this State, and was numbered 9999. I couldn't very well forget that, could I?"

"Thank you," said Nick. "That's all I want to know at present. Now, can you show me to a telephone that I can use?"

"Right here," said Sim Spaulding, "in my office."

To call up the proper authorities and ascertain to whom such a license had been issued was so simple a procedure and so quick of results that it need not be described here.

That much accomplished, Nick Carter, while seated at the same telephone, communicated with the police in the city where that license number had been issued. He told them who he was, and he asked that the owner of the car be placed under arrest at once, charged with the murder of Black Ben Battles.

It was, perhaps, a heroic step to take, but there was no time to be lost, and, in some way, the owner of that car, even if not personally cognizant of the use to which it had been put, would be able to tell by whom it had been used, and to assist in the apprehension of those who had made use of it.

Then the detective made a third use of the telephone by calling up John Brayton's house to inquire if Patsy had yet telephoned. He had not done so, however, and so, leaving word with Brayton that Patsy should be told where and how to meet him—and he gave full directions—he turned to the man who had brought him to Bixby Four Corners and said:

"I'll pay you five dollars an hour to take me where I want to go."

"I'll take you, mister, without any charge at all, if you'll just pay for the gasoline," was the quick reply.

It was an hour and a half later when the detective drove into a certain city in the State of New Jersey. Here he stopped the car before police headquarters, and was pleased as well as surprised to encounter Patsy standing upon the steps of it.

"I telephoned to Mr. Brayton not ten minutes ago," said Patsy, "and was told that I was to meet you here where I already was; so I have been waiting. I have in that woman down, chief. Her name isn't Field at all; it's Forrest, and she lives in a little white house about a mile and a half outside the city line."

* * * * *

There is very little more that need be told in the relation of this story.

Out at the house which Patsy had mentioned, and which Miriam Archer already had described to Nick Carter, they found a woman and three men in the act of taking their departure, and with tickets for a steamer which was to take them to Europe.

They were English crooks, with records, and had belonged to the same gang with which the younger Ben Battles had been identified before his trip to America; and this woman, who had left the imprint of the heel of her shoe in the ground near Brayton's home and in the pathway outside the cabin near the lake, had indeed been the younger Ben Battles' "woman."

The fact that she strenuously denied the murder of her husband and that the men asserted that they had not been in the vicinity of Brayton's home at all did not fease the detective in his determination to convict them. Ultimately, with the aid of Sim Spaulding and his relatives, they were identified. The woman was positively recognized by Miriam as the one who had taken her away from the hotel.

Under a rigid examination at the headquarters of police, one of the men broke down and confessed to the entire plot, which was very much as Nick Carter had outlined it in his theory of the case. The commission of murder in the furtherance of their plans had not been anticipated, but the introduction of young Jack Brayton into their affairs had complicated matters so extensively that Black Ben had been for abandoning the plot altogether at the last moment. It was because he would have nothing to do with so great a crime as murder that two of the men who had been assigned to assist him went over his head and stole the boy from his room that night, without Ben's knowledge.

But the woman, who had been the arch conspirator in the entire matter, knew that he had spied upon them, and she followed him to his cabin, where she killed him, as has already been described.

John Brayton, when he had been told all that there was to recount about this sad affair, decided at once that he would keep with him in his household and as his heir the girl who had been made the unconscious victim of such stupendous scheming.

THE END.

"A Difficult Trail; or, Nick Carter's Strange Quest," is the title of the story which will appear in the next issue of this weekly, No. 777—to be published on November 18th. In this the famous detective will be shown engaged in a baffling quest to which he addresses his efforts as a result of a startling and altogether unexpected development of the Brayton case. Nick Carter, despite his wealth of experience and profound study of criminalology, finds himself beyond his depth, but whether he succeeds or fails in his attempt to bring to justice one of the most extraordinary crooks he ever encountered the reader of this remarkable narrative must learn for himself.

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